
THE SHERIFF'S
WOMAN

CAROLYN FAULKNER



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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only.
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Chapter 1

When they were introduced, he was immediately reminded of that line by F. Scott Fitzgerald, "He saw her before he saw anything else in the room." For him, his friends melted away—even Jake, who was standing right next to him—the party, the house, the neighborhood, everything. There was nothing in his vision, nothing on his mind, but her.

The attraction he felt was overwhelming and thus more than slightly unsettling. Richard didn't react to things—or people—that way. His choice of career dictated that he be as level headed and unflappable as possible, and he prided himself on being both down to the bone.

But, when she gave him a small, somewhat awkward looking smile and shook his hand, he was smitten. It was an old-fashioned word, but there was no other more modern equivalent for it that really fit how he felt.

Suddenly he realized that he was just standing there like a lunk, staring at her while holding her hand, and he knew that was likely to weird her out more so than others, so he said hastily, "It's nice to meet you, Merice."

She retrieved her hand from his very quickly in a move that might have been considered almost impolite, but he could see that she was nervous and put it down to the fact that he knew she wasn't at all comfortable meeting new people.

Still, she did reply softly, those startling, stormy gray eyes fixed on some point near his collarbone, "It's nice to meet you, too, Richard," before giving him another smaller, even stiffer smile, if that was possible, while mumbling, "Excuse me, I have to..."

He didn't hear what she had to do, but he suspected that she'd just trailed off as she made her way through the throng of people, most of whom acknowledged her in one way or the other. He was interested to note that she looked just as uncomfortable with them as she had with him as she was touched on the arm, grabbed by the wrist, and—in one case—full-body hugged by some of the people she walked past.

It surprised him that the hug was the only thing she'd looked okay with as she disappeared into the kitchen.

"I told you she's a little socially awkward."

Richard nodded, saying absently as his eyes continued to follow her around the room, until she disappeared into what he knew was the kitchen, "I remember."

"Try not to judge her on that. She's really a great person once you get to know her."

"I won't." Now he was the one who was uncomfortable. He'd never agreed to be set up with this woman. Jake—and the rest of his friends—had decided, all on their own, that he needed to get back into the game, that it was time for him to start dating again after the loss of his wife.

And, although he'd never considered relationships to be a game, he had to concede that they weren't wrong. He'd been a widower for two years, during which he'd lived a very monk-like existence. He'd barely ever been able to keep his hands off his wife the whole time they were together—almost twenty-

five years—but he could honestly say that, since she died, the only sexual experience he'd had had been the occasional wet dream that always starred her and left him feeling unsettled in the extreme.

Hell, he'd never reacted to Anita the way he was to Merice, and that felt more than a little disloyal.

Luckily, his friend interrupted his thoughts before they could go down that dark path. "Wanna beer? I brought some Smiling Irish Bastard and tucked it into the back of the beer fridge. Hopefully that'll keep these voracious drinkers away from it."

Richard chuckled, holding up one of his contributions to the pot luck dinner—a growler full of that, plus another of what he knew his host liked best, Dad's Oatmeal Stout. "Great minds and all."

"You are the man!" His friend slapped him on the shoulder, then leaned back to give him an expectant look. "You did bring your beer cheese, right? Jenny will have your head if you didn't. You know how much she loves that stuff."

Richard hefted a shopping bag. "Beer cheese and Scoops. I know who cooks the meals I eat when I come over here, and it isn't you. Did you really think I'd forget her?"

"No, man. Damn, I have to get you married off or you're going to steal her away from me—you're makin' me look bad, man."

"Please. You can do that all by yourself; you don't need any help from me."

After he put his snacks on the over-laden dining room table, they headed for the beer fridge, which unfortunately wasn't in the kitchen, but rather Jake's garage, so Richard didn't get a chance to see Merice again.

But, even as he circulated around, bumping fists with some, shaking hands with others, hugging or being hugged by lots of his friends, male and female, his eyes kept wandering to

the door behind which she had disappeared, but from which she reappeared with gratifying regularity.

She flitted in and out and seemed to have appointed herself as a one woman cleanup crew as she wove her way in and out of the small clusters of people who were chatting and drinking and munching, but doing none of that herself, he noticed.

Eventually, after politely extracting himself from a conversation he wasn't following anyway, he followed her there, then decided that he shouldn't arrive empty handed. So he picked up an empty tray from the snack table, holding it balanced on his fingertips like the experienced waiter he had been in his youth, while circulating around the room and filling it with the empty solo cups, dead soldiers, and other party detritus before making his way there. It was a swinging door, and he was able to enter silently and observe her for a long moment without her noticing his presence.

She was standing about fifteen feet away from him at the kitchen counter, in front of the sink, elbow deep in sudsy water. She was wearing a pair of those pink rubber gloves that had turned down cuffs that were flowery in complimentary colors, a loose t-shirt of some sort, and jeans that he wished were tighter. She'd obviously dressed for comfort, and, he intuited, in a way that revealed very little about her body—not that what she was wearing mattered to him in the least. If anything, it was what she had not been wearing when they had been introduced earlier that meant something to him—a wedding ring.

He could hear the dishwasher humming next to her, but it was the music that was coming through the house's wide speakers that was the predominant sound in the room, and she was obviously enjoying it, and he was thoroughly enjoying her enjoyment, on just about as many levels as was possible.

She was rocking out to The Maverick's song, *All You Ever*

Do is Bring Me Down, singing—and she had a decent voice—as well as dancing in place to the catchy tune, wiggling her hips and moving her feet in time to the music as she hand washed the dishes that were piled up around her.

He became instantly hard at the sight, and it was a bit of a wakeup call for him. It had been a very long time since he'd reacted to any woman in that way, and it made him realize, at the same time, quite starkly, that he was acting like a creeper. He heard his wife—Anita—chiding him about it as clearly as if she had been standing next to him.

So he strode towards her, announcing his presence as he did so. "I noticed you were being a clean-up fairy, and I hope you don't mind, but I brought some contributions."

She started a bit at the sound of his voice but recovered quickly, he was glad to see.

"Thank you. All contributions are gratefully accepted." Her smile was shy and barely there, but he found that very endearing.

"Would you like some help?" he asked. "I'd be glad to dry."

He was being disgustingly nice, and as hard as she tried, Merice wasn't able to come up with a reason why he shouldn't, dammit. "Sure! Thanks!" she answered, with what she hoped was an appropriate amount of gratitude and enthusiasm.

In truth, she would have been much happier to have continued doing what she was always did—skirting around on the edges of being social and finding something to do to keep her busy, which helped keep her social anxiety tamped down to a dull roar. Merice had long since learned that most people were only too happy to have someone else pitch in with the cleaning, and although she knew her friends consid-

ered her to be an odd duck for doing so, she had long since begun the habit of always trying to do that, even while the get together was ongoing. She'd found that it kept others from trying to draw her into conversations when she floated around the room with her hands perpetually full of things that needed throwing away or washing up, knowing that they silently worried that she was going to draft them into helping, which was really the very last impulse on her mind. It was a habit that she'd chosen because it specifically let itself to being done alone, and yet here he was, being annoyingly helpful.

"Jenny told me that you're a painter. Do you have a gallery at which your works are displayed?" he asked, leaning back against the counter so he could look at her occasionally while he spoke, careful not to stare at her, and consciously making his deep voice—which could easily trend into an intimidating tone—sound as friendly and interested as possible.

She chuckled softly, and he loved the tinkling sound of it. "I'm not so much a painter as a dabbler. It's a hobby rather than a profession, as I have the bad habit of liking to, you know, eat and pay rent."

He laughed, too. "Do you enter the craft fairs and such around town?"

"Occasionally—some of the entry fees are relatively steep."

"It's got to be worth it, though, right? That would offset the fee?"

"It would if I'd sold anything."

Well, this wasn't going very well, but then, he was so far out of practice as to be ridiculous. He was managing to put his foot into it at every turn. She wasn't a professional painter and she

hadn't been able to sell anything. Strike one and two already, and he'd barely begun to talk to her!

"Oh dear. Obviously, the citizens of Hampton Falls have no taste in art."

She laughed again, although he wasn't sure why. "You've never seen my stuff—how would you know that? It could be full of stick figures that look like mutants."

"I've heard both Jake and Jenny rhapsodize about your talent, and I trust their opinions," he replied smoothly.

She didn't look as if she found his comment to be reassuring in the least and fell silent.

Meanwhile, Merice was desperately trying to come up with something to say, not wanting to stand there like a bump on a log. Why she cared about what this man—this stranger—thought about her, she would never know. It wasn't like her to, frankly. She would have said that she'd long since gotten past worrying about that kind of thing. Long before she should have, she knew her mother—who was always hoping she'd get married—had thought. But apparently not, considering how nervous he was making her feel.

"You're a sheriff if I remember correctly?" she asked.

"Yes."

"I'll have to watch my speed from now on then, I suppose."

He didn't know why, but his response was nothing shy of purely and instinctively dominant—deeply scolding in tone and words. "You should always watch your speed, Merice."

Now, if she hadn't been a stranger to him, he might not have felt this way, but considering that they'd just met, and

despite how distinctly not dominant the impulse might have seemed, he dearly wished that he could have retracted those words as soon as he said them.

Although he felt a little better when it caused her to look at him straight on for the first time, even though it made him even more erect than he had been before. Her eyes were wide, she was biting her lip, and she was blushing as if she'd just realized the error of her ways. It was quite a telling response, and one he found extremely intriguing.

He watched her open her mouth, then close it again, then open it, then close it again before returning her attention to the dishes she was working on.

Merice knew that she should take him to task for having the audacity to say something like that to her, especially in that blatantly chastising way. But since hearing something like that, particularly from a man like him, was something she'd fantasized about for her entire life but never experienced, she couldn't quite bring herself to do that, despite the fact that it was probably setting a very bad precedent with him. Still, she likely would never see him again, so she didn't feel as if she had much too worry about along those lines, either.

Knowing he was pushing his luck, Richard took one of the bowls from the washed pile and began to dry it with a towel, unable to stop himself from pushing just a bit further, despite the fact that his brain was screaming at him not to. But he carefully made certain that the question was a quiet inquiry, with no judgment attached. "Do you have a lead foot, Merice?"

He looked down at her feet, which were impossibly small and encased in pink sneakers, which was an unexpectedly whimsical detail about her that he definitely liked.

"Sometimes," she allowed, rinsing off a nine by thirteen glass pan before handing it to him directly. Searching for something that would change the subject, she began to do

what she'd learned to do in situations like this. People loved to talk about themselves, so she began to ask him questions about himself. "Why did you become a sheriff?"

"Well, I did a twenty year hitch in the military—"

"Which branch, if you don't mind me asking?" she interrupted.

"Air Force."

Merice nodded.

"And came back to town looking for something to do. There was an opening in the sheriff's department, and I applied and got the job. I'd been Security Police while I was in the service, so I had some experience."

"Where were you stationed?"

"Lots of places. Davis-Monthan, which is in Tucson, Wright-Patt in Ohio, Turkey, Germany, Elmendorf, in Alaska..."

"Wow! You've been all over everywhere!"

"Yeah." He snorted softly. "It was so long ago that I was stationed at bases that no longer exist."

"Where was your favorite place?"

"To live?"

"Yes."

She sounded actually interested in his reply for the first time.

"Alaska. I'd go back there in a heartbeat if I got the chance."

Merice nodded. "I imagine it's beautiful."

"It is. Cold as a witch's tit, but breathtakingly beautiful."

She was pretty much done with the dishes, but he was lagging behind, so she grabbed a towel and started in without a word.

"Have you ever lived anywhere else but Vermont?"

"No, I haven't," she said, continuing wistfully, "I've always wanted to travel, but it wasn't in the cards. I'm an only child,

and I ended up taking care of my parents." And she probably wouldn't be very comfortable traveling, anyways. Not that he needed to know that. And she did like to daydream about going sometimes.

"Oh dear. I'm sorry."

To his surprise, she smiled up at him. "Don't be. I was very lucky to have had great parents, and I wouldn't have wanted anyone else to take care of them. By the time they were both gone, I was deep into my actual work and didn't feel that I could spend the money to travel, plus I didn't have anyone who could really go with me, since I didn't have a boyfriend at that point, and everyone else was busy with their husbands and children."

Richard nodded.

"Perhaps I'll start traveling now, though. I'm an office manager, which is boring as all get out, but I'm at the point where I'm okay financially, so I might well." As much as she wanted to, though, Merice realized that she liked the idea of traveling more than she'd probably like the reality of it.

"You should definitely pick a place—like Alaska—and go. Why not?"

"If I do, I'll call you and ask for advice about where I should go and what I should see."

She was dumbfounded when he put his hand out to her, until he explained, "If you want, I'll put my number in your phone. You don't have to give me yours, but I'd be only too glad to help if you decide to travel somewhere I know anything about."

Merice had never once ever handed her phone over to a stranger, and she hesitated in doing so this time, too.

Richard immediately withdrew his hand. "Only if you're comfortable with my doing that, of course."

She put in her pass code, brought up contacts, then handed it to him.

He quickly and efficiently did just that, handing the phone back seconds later. "Don't feel obligated, but like I said, I'd be glad to help."

"Thank you."

Richard knew he'd stepped on her comfort zone, and he decided that this would probably be the best time to execute a strategic retreat. He didn't want to overstay what little welcome she'd given him, which, luckily, didn't deter him, either. "It's been great talking to you, Merice. I'm going to annoy Jake."

"It's been nice talking to you, too, Richard," she agreed, realizing with a start that she wasn't just mouthing the expected platitude, which was how it usually was for her.

He paused at the door. "Watch your speed when you're driving, honey," he cautioned, deliberately using that chiding tone before ducking back into the living room.

When he was gone, Merice breathed a sigh of relief, but his parting shot had her more wound up than she wanted to be, and she was horrified to realize that she could feel her recalcitrant body's involuntary reaction to him dripping onto her panties. She didn't want to be attracted to him—she didn't want to be attracted to anyone, much less a distinctly dominant cop. She had a nice, quiet life by herself, with everything arranged exactly to her liking, and despite her friend's continued, dedicated efforts to set her up with every Tom, Dick, and Harry, she didn't intend to go upsetting the applecart this late in her life.

For his part, Richard found himself watching for her during the rest of the evening, no matter who he was talking to, from a stranger to his best friends, none of them held all of his attention. Parts of him were always scanning the crowd for her, his eyes returning to the kitchen door frequently, and if he was able to spot her, trying not to get caught watching her—by her, or anyone else, for that matter.

As the evening was winding down and people were leaving, he deliberately hung around longer than he might have normally, because she was still here. He would've thought that with her social anxiety, she would have been one of the first to leave, but instead, she threw herself into helping Jenny set the house to rights as he and Jake sat on the couch and talked.

He wasn't waiting for her, exactly, although he could tell that that was what his friend thought he was doing, so he forced himself to get up. "Well, I'm going to head home," he announced, standing and draining his beer.

Jake rose, too, saying with a knowing grin, "Are you sure? I'd be willing to bet she's going to leave shortly, too."

Richard frowned, managing a reasonably believable, "Who?"

"Who?" Jake parroted. "Merice. You've been half listening to everyone you've talked to all night, and you went in there to talk to her for a while early on, too."

He didn't look happy that his friend had noticed those details.

"Oh, c'mon. It's a good thing that you're getting back into the swing of things. Anita would have wanted you to do that long before this."

"How would you know that?"

"How do I know anything about anybody—Jenny told me that Anita told her."

"Well, don't make a mountain out of a molehill."

Jake put his hands up. "I'm just sayin'."

At that moment, Jenny and Merice both came out of the kitchen.

"Are you leaving? Not without kissing me goodbye, I hope," Jenny commented accusatorily, walking up to Richard and wrapping her arms around his thick neck.

"Of course not!" He hugged the woman who had been his wife's best friend, and who had been there unfailingly for him

throughout both her long illness and his bereavement afterwards.

"Merice is leaving, too, so you guys can walk out together," Jenny suggested slyly.

Richard gave her a cautionary look that had Merice's heart flip-flopping in her chest, happy that it wasn't aimed at her, although Jenny didn't look as if she'd even noticed it.

But then, Jenny wasn't a submissive, either.

"Yes, yenta."

Merice hugged Jenny, and even Jake. He was one of the few men she'd allow to do that. It wasn't that she hated men—she didn't. She liked men and she was attracted to men—some men.

She was just really fussy about who she let touch her. She was just as discriminating about the women she let hug her as she was the men, but Jenny was one of her oldest friends, and she insisted on parting hugs. It was a habit that she'd not been able to train her out of, so she'd long ago just given up and let it happen, even learning to like it—eventually.

As with Richard and his wife, Jenny had been an incredible support when she'd been taking care of her parents, helping make sure not only that they were getting the best care possible, but also making certain that, during those trying, stressful times, that Merice was also taking care of herself and getting respite care.

As if Jenny had preordained it, they ended up walking to their cars together where they were parked on the street, which was a testament to just how popular Jenny and Jake were, since neither of them had been late. And Richard was doing exactly as their mutual friend had wanted him to—walking her to her car.

"You really don't have to, you know. I'm fine on my own."

"I'm sure you are," he answered, voice very low. "But how

could I consider myself a gentleman if I didn't see a lady safely to her car?"

It was an unusual word for a man to use to describe himself, especially nowadays.

She might have been very skittish about him accompanying her, but he remained a respectful distance away from her the entire time. When they got there, he heard her unlock the doors—noting that it likely was only the driver's side door, which was smart of her in regards to her personal security.

He was standing in front of the car when he asked, "Would you like to go get a cup of coffee? I know Classy's is still open twenty-four hours." Richard mentioned the name of a twenty-four hour diner—really, the only one in the state.

It was on the tip of her tongue to say no. She should definitely say no, her mind was demanding. She didn't know this man, and the fact that he was a sheriff didn't cut him any slack, as far as she was concerned. There were definitely bad sheriffs, too.

But, for once in her life, her body overrode her mind's common sense, and before she could do anything to stop it, she heard herself say, "Okay."

He grinned, and it was a devastating sight to her. She would swear that her heart dropped to her feet, and she felt a little lightheaded.

"Good. I'll follow you."

"Oh, hell no! You'll be clocking my speed and present me with a ticket when we get there!" She was only half-teasing.

He grinned. "Not that I couldn't, but I'm off duty."

"Way to reassure a girl, officer."

Sensing that she was waffling and leaning towards not accepting his offer, he said, "C'mon. I'll tell you more about my illustrious military career."

"Illustrious, huh?" A big vocabulary was much more enticing to her than the size of a man's equipment. After all,

there were many replacements for a dick, but there really weren't any for the lack of a decent vocabulary.

"Yeah. I went from a non-com to an officer."

"From a who to a what? I don't speak military."

"Well, come with me and I'll teach you."

Damn. She should have just told him no outright, but again, she found herself unable to just shut him down, like she'd done with a reasonable number of men over the years. Then she found herself saying, "All right, but I can't stay out too late."

"Why? Do you turn into a pumpkin after midnight?"

"No, but I'm quite likely to fall asleep on you. I'm an early riser."

"Ah. Understood. Well, I'll do my best to get you home before that happens."

Richard was thinking that he wouldn't mind her falling asleep on him at all—but in bed, exhausted and thoroughly sated, of course.

"After you," he said, turning towards where his car was parked.

"No," she said pointedly, "after you."

The Classy Joint—or just the Classy, as it was known to natives—was, indeed, the only thing open. It was on route 4, just outside of the west part of town, where it could attract tourists who were just arriving from the city as well as folks who lived there year 'round.

Merice followed him at a safe distance, noting that he followed every posted speed limit, but she supposed that strict adherence like that was a remnant of being a cop. She'd rather that than him speeding all the time, like a hypocrite.

They each ordered coffee, and he had a slice of their famous chocolate cream pie, which was the size of a head and easily four inches tall, covered in real whipped cream.

"Have some with me?" he invited, pushing the plate towards her.

"I couldn't," she demurred. "I'm too full from the party."

"Liar," he accused softly.

"I'm sorry, what?" Merice didn't bother keeping the indignation out of her voice.

"Unless you stopped eating the moment I arrived, I watched you throughout the evening, and I never saw you touch any of the food."

Merice wasn't sure what to say. He was right, of course, but she certainly hadn't expected that he had kept such close tabs on her.

He nudged the plate towards her again. "Have some. It'll alleviate the guilt I feel at ordering it, knowing that your doctor is likely to lecture you about eating it, too."

She didn't want to, but she both laughed at that remark and took a small bite of the pie, which was a definite weakness of hers.

"I have to admit that I find myself more than a bit disconcerted by you admitting that you watched me all night." Her eyes found his deliberately, and he didn't flinch away.

"Point taken. But you must've heard from our mutual friends that I'm harmless, and cop habits die hard." He took a man-sized forkful of the pie, then put his fork down before clearing his throat. *Was that nervously?* she wondered, before saying, "It's been a long time since I've been interested in any woman who wasn't my wife."

Well, that short sentence told her a lot about him if he was telling her the truth, and she thought he probably was. He'd been married for a while, he'd not cheated on his wife, and he was attracted to her. It was the latter thing that caused her heart to skip a beat, making her feel a bit breathless, and it had nothing to do with her benign arrhythmia.

She put her fork down, too, even though there was still a

ton of pie left, and it was as if he could feel her physically and emotionally withdrawing from him.

"I didn't mean to make you feel uncomfortable. Jenny and Jake told me about your social anxiety."

She surprised him by smiling, if a bit ruefully. "Yeah, and talking about my social anxiety makes me socially anxious."

"Oh, I'm sorry!" He sounded appalled at himself, and although she appreciated that he cared about not making her feel awkward, she said, "I'm teasing—although it is true. I just don't do well in social situations."

"Hence the straightening up," he thoughtfully deduced, pushing the plate towards her again as a hint.

"Bingo."

"Have some more, please," he asked, but she got the distinct feeling because of how he said it that, despite the "please", he wasn't really asking. "That's a great trick—you can be at the party, and join whatever conversation you want, or not, but you're doing something most people, guests and hosts included, hate, so it's a great contribution, and you're keeping yourself busy, which, I'll bet, helps you feel less nervous."

Again, although she didn't like the idea of setting a bad precedent with him, she did as he asked, but took a much smaller bite of it for herself before she tipped her head to one side, swirling the sweet, dark chocolate around in her mouth. "Thank you. That's a very thoughtful deduction. I'm not in any way normal—and not just about social situations—and it's helped me a lot. Frankly, it's allowed me to go to parties when I used to just automatically say no, to the point that my friends stopped inviting me."

Richard saw what she was doing with the pie and wished that it was him instead. "Well, I'm very glad you were there tonight."

"So am I," she agreed without a trace of sarcasm.

"I'm a pretty straightforward guy."

She was obviously suppressing a grin when she commented, "I think I've already gotten that idea."

He actually colored a little at that. "Well, at least you—everyone always knows where they stand with me."

Merice raised her eyebrows but nodded at the same time.

"I-I'd like to take you out on a date, Merice."

"Because Jake and Jenny asked you to?"

He laughed, and it was a low, deep rumble that went straight to her clit and purred slowly over it. "They did not, to their credit, although they did tell me a little about you—that you're a painter, and shy, and nice. I think they know better than to push me quite that far." He took a good sized piece, then said, "Have the rest, honey."

By then, her addiction had set in, and she was going to eat the rest of it whether he wanted her to or not.

"So, did they tell you about me?"

She shrugged. "The bare bones—that you're a widower, and a stand-up guy, and smart and nice."

"That's very good of them to say about me."

"It is."

She was licking the fork, and he was totally distracted by her incredible attention to detail, not to mention how adept she was with her tongue.

He had to drag his gaze away from her. "So? Will you go out with me?"

Her eyes met his, and he could feel her tensing at his question.

"We'll go wherever you want—it doesn't have to be a sit down dinner date—and do whatever you want."

That got him a tiny smile. "Oh dear. You're very brave. What if I wanted you to spend the afternoon basket weaving or bungee jumping?"

Richard laughed. "I have a feeling those are things I'm likely to choose as things for us to do, not you."

She looked chagrined. "You're not wrong."

"So, would this Saturday work for you?"

Her eyes flitted to his, then back to the pie. "You're persistent, I'll give you that."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

Merice drew a breath and gave him the answer she'd known she was going to give him all along. "Yes."

There was that thousand watt smile of his. "Thank you. I'll get in touch with you about the particulars later in the week." Then he glanced at his watch. "It's eleven-forty-five. We'd better leave if you're to get home before midnight, Cinderelly."

She had to smile at that. Merice pulled out her wallet, but he'd already thrown a twenty onto the table, which paid their bill twice over, easily.

"You sure you don't want a contribution?"

Richard caught her eye, stating steadily, "If I want one, I'll ask for one, I promise." He stood and put his hand out to her, knowing she might well refuse it just on principle.

But she didn't, and he felt an inordinate thrill when she put her small hand in his.

He didn't leave it there, though, tucking it into the crook of his arm. "Thanks for the pie, Rachel!" he called to the waitress.

"You're welcome, Sheriff."

She hadn't thought about him knowing everyone at the diners and dives around the area, due to his occupation. At least he tipped generously.

Richard walked her to her car, amazed at just how reluctant he was to let her go. "I don't suppose you'd consider having a nightcap with me, at my place?" he asked, voice full of hope, regardless.

The automatic "no" was on the tip of her tongue even before he finished the question, and he knew it.

"I-I..." Inside, her brain was screaming, "Just say no!" Why she couldn't get it out, she would never know.

He took a step towards her, which—because he was doing his best to be respectful of her—still left several feet between them, giving her a deliberately serious look. "Did you know that your inspection is out of date, Ms. Boynton?"

Damn, he should have been an actor, with his innate ability to adjust his voice from light and friendly one moment to scolding headmaster the next. She actually looked worried, whipping around to look at the sticker on her windshield. He was right. "Fuck. I'll get that taken care of right away." She was tempted to call him "Sheriff Hayes" but didn't.

His "See that you do" gave her no quarter as he held her eyes for a long moment, then asked with a much friendlier demeanor, "Nightcap, yes or no?"

Biting the inside of her lip nervously, she nonetheless asked, "Are you going to give me a ticket if I don't?"

His scowl was something to behold, and if she could have taken a step back at the sight of it, she would have.

"No. I realize that you don't know me, and all you have to go on are Jake and Jenny's opinions, which are likely to be somewhat biased, but I'm not that kind of man. There is no quid pro quo going on here, and I'm not trying to strong arm you in any way. That is very much not my style. If you don't want a nightcap, just say so, and I'll see you on Saturday."

Merice drew a deep breath as she searched his eyes. Her instincts had always proven very accurate about men, and she had a feeling that they were right about him, too. And the fact that her friends had lavished praise on him didn't hurt, either. Apparently, they considered him to be just beneath a saint for how wonderful he was to his wife—both before and during her illness, as well as how devoted he'd been to her even in

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death. He thought the sun rose and set on her and didn't care who knew it.

Those were all big points in his favor that played into an answer she hadn't given very many men when they'd asked her the same question.

"Yes, please."

Chapter 2

His house was newer than her own, but then, she'd inherited hers from her parents, who had inherited it from their parents. It was a good size, but not a McMansion by any means. Richard let them in a side door, and they passed through a large, open, well-equipped kitchen on their way to the den. Merice got a glimpse of a smallish dining room and foyer, and then the large den, which was done in warm earth tones with a lot of hardwood, but no paneling, which she didn't like anyway. There were pictures everywhere, and she stopped to look at every one of them.

His wife had been pretty but not beautiful, but they were both smiling in almost every picture. She could see the progression of the two of them together, from young married couple to later middle-aged couple, but the pictures all stopped there abruptly. There were some from the places he had mentioned he'd been stationed, and many more of her than him.

There was a rogues' gallery across the mantel, where he found her once he'd poured her drink, which he held out to her. "Ah. I see you found that I'm an amateur photographer."

"I hope you don't mind."

"Of course not—as Anita would have said, "That's why they're up there—to be looked at'."

She got him talking about some of them, although Merice tried to keep the topic away from his wife, not wanting to make him sad.

He stood by the couch but didn't sit. "Please make yourself to home."

It took her several minutes before she realized that he was waiting for her to sit before he did, which was another old-fashioned trait she appreciated. When she did, it was in one of the big, comfortable looking chairs near the sofa, where he'd landed.

"You said something when we were talking at Jake and Jenny's about," she tried to remember his exact verbiage, "something like you were a non-com—"

Richard wasn't fond of people who interrupted him, but he did it to her because he could hear that she was struggling with the unfamiliar phrases. "Non-com—non-commissioned officer. I started out as an Airman Basic, and I went to school at night, and by the time I'd finished my second hitch, I had graduated college and become an officer. It's called being a retread, and not many folks do that—or they didn't used to, anyway. I've been out so long that I don't really know anymore."

"Thank you for your service."

He nodded solemnly. "You're welcome."

"No wonder you sound..." How did one say "dominant" without saying "dominant", she wondered. "Like you're very comfortable with being in charge."

He smiled. "I am—have been—like that all my life, and definitely in both of my professions, but as an officer, they really drill that into you. The voice is a very powerful tool, if one knows how to use it."

"It most definitely is," she murmured absently, eyes opening very wide when she realized that what should have been a silent comment to herself, wasn't.

Richard just chuckled as she felt his eyes settle on her, and that rumbled purr washed over her in a way she wished it wouldn't. The combination of the two was very potent to her—much more so than she wanted it to be. She'd never met a man who was so naturally dominant. It was obviously not an affectation with him, as it was with so many other wannabes.

He didn't try to be one or hope to be one, nor was he studying how to be one. He just was that way, unapologetically.

That revelation tickled a question out of the back of her mind, and she couldn't help wondering if he was dominant in bed. Some men who found themselves in occupations where they were required to take charge, preferred not to be in their personal lives.

"Do you like deep voices in men?"

Hoping she looked much more casual than she felt at the moment, Merice replied, "I think that that's a preference most women have. Few of us want to become involved with a man who sounds like Mickey Mouse."

He inclined his head in agreement. "True. And do you like men who are comfortable being in charge?"

"I like all sorts of men."

He wasn't about to allow her to dodge the question. "But if you could have your preference, Merice?"

She looked at her non-existent watch. "Oh, dear me. Look at the time. I'm feeling distinctly pumpkiny. I should probably go." Merice rose, as did he, trailing after her back to the door from whence they had come.

Although he very much wanted an answer to his question, Richard switched gears gracefully. "Are you all right to drive? Do you want me to follow you home?" he asked solicitously.

Some women might have found that a little cloying or forward, but she liked it. She didn't sense any kind of nefarious intent. She couldn't think that he was anything more than a very nice man who wanted to make sure that she arrived home safely.

"I'm fine, thanks."

Just as she was going to turn and open the door, he handed her his phone. "I just realized that you have my number, but I don't have yours. Would you put yourself in, and I'll get ahold of you Wednesday or so about us getting together on Saturday?"

"Ugh. This is an Android," she pronounced, handing it back to him. "I have no idea how to add myself to your weird phone. If you'll create a contact, I'll tell you my number."

Far from being offended at her snubbing his phone choice, he was actually chuckling. When he was done, he looked down at her, stuffing his hands into his pockets. He had to, or he was going to reach out and pull her against him, whether she wanted him to or not. "May I kiss you goodnight, Merice?"

Why did the sound of her name on his lips make her feel like her world was spinning around, independent of the rest of the planet? She wasn't at all prone to the vapors—especially not about men—dogs, cats, horses, otters, seals, and maybe her friends, sometimes, but not men.

"I, uh..." She shook her head. Why did he have the power to reduce her to sounding like a mindless dolt?

Richard took a step closer to her, hands still in his pockets. "I would very much like to," he proclaimed guilelessly, in a husky whisper, still staring down at her but only able to see the back of her head as she was diligently gazing at her feet.

Oh, Christ, she would very much like him to, too, but there were alarm bells—klaxons, really—going off in her head. Not that she felt unsafe with him, exactly. She just didn't feel all that safe with him, but in a good way, which confused

her. Maybe she was feeling that she would be as safe as she wanted to be with him, and that wasn't very?

Another step, and he was right in front of her. She could see his enormous feet, encased in what looked like expensive leather dress shoes. They looked like gunboats, especially in contrast to hers, which looked like the person wearing them couldn't be much more than four years old.

"I like your sneakers, Ms. Boynton," he complimented, apropos of nothing, but hoping its neutrality would help her calm down. He could hear her unsettled breathing, and based on what he'd learned about her over the course of the evening, chalked it up to her being nervous, not aroused.

Her head jerked up at that so that she could meet his clear brown eyes, sensing no judgment about them at all—it was just as simple as what he'd said—he liked them. "Jenny says they look like something a kid would wear."

"And do you care what Jenny says?" he asked, his voice impossibly soft.

Merice shrugged. "Apparently not, since I wore them to her party."

He laughed softly, and she could smell the whiskey on his breath, mixed with the chocolate and coffee of what he'd had at the diner, and for some reason, it soothed her against her will. "Good for you."

As she stood there, looking up at him, he moved his feet so that they were outside of her own, which spread his legs a bit and made him a few inches shorter, which she appreciated. She liked tall men but standing there like that was going to give her a wicked crick in her neck.

"Answer my question, Merice," he prompted quietly, with a slight edge of impatience. Richard saw her swallow hard and noted that she was biting the inside of her cheek, but she neither said nor did anything more than that. So he reached

out and opened the door, not caring, at the moment, how much wildlife came in because of it.

"You haven't told me no, but you can leave any time. I suppose I should—technically—wait for an enthusiastic 'yes', but I don't want to. So if you don't want me to kiss you in the next fifteen seconds, then I suggest you use the door to depart."

Her eyes were on his, the entire time, and he knew that she was struggling with indecision.

So he counted to fifteen as slowly as he possibly could—and much more slowly than he wanted to. And when he got to fifteen, he didn't grab her or pull her against him. He didn't even take his hands out of his pockets. He didn't need to. Instead, Richard simply bent down, holding her eyes with his as he very gently slanted his lips across hers.

She mewled softly, just once, when their lips met, and he instantly wanted to do all of the things he wasn't going to let himself do—wrap her tightly against him, lift her with one arm around her waist, and take her right there, up against the door, once he'd closed it—or heft her over his shoulder and carry her to his room, or ease her onto the floor.

One hand found its way out of his pocket to hold her chin in such a way that she could barely tell it was there, but that in itself was a very powerful thing to do. He didn't need to manhandle her. He didn't need to force her. She'd stood right there, as if he'd bound her in place, and let him kiss her, not moving a muscle or giving voice to the slightest of protests as she gently, hesitatingly, kissed him back.

He felt as if he'd won the lottery when she began to tentatively respond to him.

Despite the fact that he hadn't made the slightest move to coerce her into kissing him back, Merice didn't feel as if she had much choice. His lips felt more right to her than any other man's

had in her experience. Oh, some of her lovers had been really good for her and to her, but they had nothing on this man, and all the two of them had done was talk and kiss—once.

When he ended it, she whimpered again, and his hand on her chin tightened a bit before he forced himself to straighten up and put that hand back away. But he couldn't quite get himself to take a step back. He should have, he knew, but he just couldn't.

She was a lovely, dusky pink as her eyes found their way to her shoes again. "That was, uh..."

This time, the other hand—his dominant one—closed the door with one flick, then tipped her face up so that her eyes were on his again. "It was what, Merice?"

It was a calm, quiet, steady question, but one she had absolutely no doubt that he expected her to answer. "Fucking amazing," she sighed, with an unguarded reverence that set his ego ablaze.

This time, he did take a step back, hands at his sides. "I know that this is sudden, and I would be willing to bet that you don't do this very often, if at all—and, frankly, I haven't done it at all I since my wife died—but I would love for you to stay the night with me."

There was a tinge of something in her expression beyond anxiety and beyond awkwardness that more closely resembled fear, and he didn't like the looks of that at all. It set him to wondering if some bastard had hurt her at some point in her life, and he knew—better than most, due to his profession—that that was extremely likely to have happened. And the thought made him downright livid, although he did his best to hide it, not wanting to frighten her further.

Although he was having a hard time doing so, he remained rock still, not cajoling or wheedling or trying to pressure her into a decision in any way. And, although the desire was certainly there, he certainly didn't order her to do so,

either. Submission without any kind of coercion—besides the occasional punishment—was always the most powerful to him.

Suddenly, she took a couple steps towards him and leaned forward, pressing her head against his chest as his hands itched to caress her hair and hold her to him.

"Richard?"

"Yes, Merice?"

"I-I've had," he heard her swallow hard and knew that this wasn't something that was easy for her to say, "I've had some not good experiences in the past that kind of put me off getting involved with anyone."

Unable not to, at her very private disclosure, he dislodged his hands from his pockets and brought his arms up very slowly to fold her small body more closely against his, squeezing tightly once, then consciously relaxing his hold.

"I understand." He made sure that his voice was calm and level, betraying no emotion, certainly nothing negative.

"I want to stay, I do. I'm just apprehensive about it."

"That's okay, honey. You don't have to stay."

"But I want to," she surprised him by whispering.

Suddenly, he asked, "Do you want me to decide for you?"

It was a terribly intimate thing to ask a man she barely knew to do for her, but she found herself nodding anyway. Right or wrong—and she supposed she was about to find out which it was—she trusted him innately. It was then that she found herself nodding her head, and what he did next proved to her that she had made the right decision.

He knew he should have taken her out to her car, or driven her home, or driven behind her while she drove home, but he didn't do any of those things. It was the right thing to do. But he couldn't. He wasn't a saint, as much as his friends wanted to make him into one over the past few years. The bald truth was that he wanted her much too badly for that, and he couldn't deny himself the opportunity to have her.

Richard leaned down and picked her up in his arms.

No one had ever carried her that way, and as she wrapped her arms around his neck, his arms tightening around her just slightly, she knew she should protest it, despite the fact that it was an experience she would likely never forget.

"You don't have to do this, Richard. I'm too heavy for you."

"No, you're not," he replied matter of factly. "And I like carrying you."

When they arrived in his bedroom, he set her down very carefully, saying, "Stay right there."

She did as she was told, for once, but even as she obeyed him, she kept her eyes on him, too.

The first thing he did was dim the lights. Then he used a lighter on a few candles—not a lot, but just enough to contribute to a very nice cozy atmosphere. He turned the bed down before returning to her.

"I want to ask you something that might seem a bit forward, but since we're going to be sleeping together, I want to know."

"Okay." Merice dragged the word out in a way that left no doubt in him that she was hesitant.

Richard reached down and took each of her hands in each of his, looking down into her eyes as he spoke. "Are you a submissive?"

The expression on her face changed subtly, and he thought he detected a bit of a stubborn set to her jaw, which surprised him. He would have bet that she was, but that was hardly a submissive reaction.

And her reply only confused him further. "Why? Are you a dominant?"

His eyebrows rose. "Yes, I am," he answered, expecting her to do the same for him.

But she remained stubbornly silent.

"Do you want me to spank the answer out of you?" he asked, reaching around to rest his palm on her backside.

She giggled nervously but dodged out from under his hand. He made no attempt to stop her from getting away from him, and she ended up standing a few feet away, out of reach, but no closer to the door than she had been if that was her aim.

When Merice snuck a look at him, one eyebrow remained raised expectantly.

"I'm sorry. I've told others about being a submissive, and it didn't go well, so I'm a bit gun shy of admitting it, I guess. Perhaps more than I'd counted on." Then she continued, in a much lowered voice, as if she was confessing something terrible that she'd done. "That was the last time I, uh, indulged that side of myself. It left me feeling unsafe to do so with a man."

"Oh, honey. I'm so sorry." He wanted to go to her with every fiber of his being, but he wasn't sure whether that would be the best thing for her. "For what it's worth, and I know I could just be full of hot air, but you're safe with me—whether or not you want to be submissive to me. I would love that, but only if you're comfortable with it. Even if I was blistering your behind, you'd still be safe with me. I'm a strange kind of dominant—well, not just Dom, but man overall, I suppose. I get off getting you off, and if you're scared, you're not going to experience pleasure."

"Do you mind if I ask you something?"

"You can ask me anything."

"Was your wife submissive to you?"

He didn't think he'd ever get used to the pain that snuck up on him at times, and this was one of them. Although he did his best to hide it, answering, "Yes, she was."

"Thank you for telling me. I didn't mean to hurt you."

He gave her a small, grateful smile. "It's just not something

I've ever discussed with anyone, you know? No one really knows—knew—that side of me besides my wife." He rubbed his hand over his face. "I'm a dominant man, but I'm wired up so that whatever I do for my sub has to be for her own good. I am not a sadist. I'm not into pain for pain's sake, not that there's anything wrong with it. I just know it's not for me."

"Neither am I."

"Good. Sounds like we might be quite compatible in a very special way."

She nodded slowly.

"What's your safe word, Merice?"

"Licorice."

"Excellent. Well, we don't have to indulge in that kind of thing if you don't want to. I'm only too happy to make you scream for other reasons." His grin was just shy of evil, and on him—with his default demeanor—it was very believable. "Do you think you might want to, or not? I don't want to make assumptions."

"I, uh," Merice licked her lips out of long habit, "do we have to go right to the whips and chains part? Can we, you know, ease into it?"

"Of course."

"Since I haven't really had very good experiences with D/s in the past, I think I need... training wheels. Or 'Intro to D/s' or something like that."

"Sounds perfect." Richard managed to say it in a way that convinced her that he really was fine with it, which was no mean feat. He was still standing several feet away from her as he began to unbutton, then take off, his shirt.

Dear God, he had a beautiful chest! He may have been in his early fifties, but he didn't look it in any aspect. He had a broad, heavily muscled chest and well-developed arms, too, that the dress shirt had been hiding.

Her "Holy crap," sounded more amazed than admiring.

He frowned. "Problem?"

"Uh, no. Just don't expect me to look like that under my t-shirt."

Richard grinned. "If you do, I'm going to be mighty surprised, and this evening is going to end much earlier than I had planned."

When he was down to his briefs, he turned to face her and said but three words, "Come here, please." It wasn't a particularly dominant phrase, as those things went, but there was no doubt that he expected her to obey him.

And, to his delight, she did—if slowly and very nervously, which he found terribly endearing.

He stood still, not beckoning her in any other way, as much as he wanted to stretch out his hand, or make encouraging noises, or even praise her.

He waited until she was standing in front of him, head down. "Very good," he breathed. "Look at me, honey." Then he heard what he'd called her. "Do you mind me calling you 'honey'? Or endearments in general?"

"No, I like them very much."

"Good. I used them a lot with my wife. She liked them, too. And she liked my voice, except when I was using it to scold her." He gave her a rueful grin.

Afraid that he might see the truth in her eyes, she cast them down again. Merice was already jealous of a woman she'd never met—and never would meet—but at the same time, she loved hearing him talk about her, because it was so blatantly obvious that he adored her, and she'd rarely encountered such deep, unabashed emotion from a man in her lifetime. She had been beginning to question whether it really existed—and, further, wondering if it ever would for her.

But she was getting way ahead of herself. There was still the possibility that she'd never see him again after this night.

Don't get happy, she tried to remind herself, as a dedicated, life-long, card carrying pessimist.

"Sweetie, I want you to look at me." His tone was softly chiding. "If I were your dominant, that would be the first rule that I would make for you—no staring at your feet."

"It's... I just..." she tried to explain herself but failed badly.

"It's a habit, one I would do my best to try to help you break. You might be submissive, but I wouldn't want you cowering before me in any way."

"I'm not cowering when I look down," she defended. "I'm just, it's hard for me to meet people's eyes sometimes."

Richard sat down on the end of the bed, reaching out to pull her between his legs. "Do you know why that is, baby girl? Did someone attach a negative consequence to doing that?"

"No."

"Not even you? Do you feel lesser when you look someone in the eye?"

The startled look on her face told him that he was right.

"Well, that is something I would try to help you overcome, if you were mine," he pronounced as he sat her on his lap. "Does spanking turn you on?"

Her blush was so revealing that he had to chuckle. "I think I just got my answer. Have you been spanked before by anyone?"

She shook her head, and Richard had to admit to himself that he was abnormally glad to hear that, even though he wasn't her Dom.

"Not even just during the course of sex?"

"Nope. Like I said, I haven't found very many men I've trusted with that kind of information about me, and the ones I decided to trust with it made me glad that I hadn't told them very much about what I like or want."

Damn, he hated to hear about what idiots some men had been to her. "Well, good girl, for being safety conscious."

He heard her sigh. "I wish I'd gotten to that sooner, rather than later."

She found herself hugged tightly against him. "Oh, Merice, so do I. Sex is so wonderful—whether it's D/s or not—that I hate to think that anyone, especially someone as delicate as you, had a bad time of it."

Merice snorted loudly. "I am hardly delicate."

"You are. Perhaps not physically, although I would wager that, in comparison to me, you are delicate that way, too. I was speaking more emotionally, though."

He could feel her shrink from him physically, and her response was barely there. "Sorry."

"Stop." The command was almost whispered but firm, nonetheless, designed to get her to obey the order, not be concerned about his tone. "There's nothing wrong with being delicate in any way, man or woman. I don't tend to be that way myself, and I know it's going to sound terribly sexist of me, but I like a woman who has a delicate side. I'm big and strong, and I have an overdeveloped need to protect the person I'm with, even from themselves. Heck, it's even in the motto on the side of my work car," he smiled, "protect and serve." Richard felt her relax a bit.

"I can't see you serving much."

"Well, then, you'd be very wrong. I'll have you know that I am a kick ass nurse."

"Oh, that's right. I forgot. You must've taken care of your wife."

He nodded, not sure he could answer her. Then he cleared his throat and said, "It was God awful, but also one of my greatest honors of my life."

"I feel the same way about taking care of my parents."

They were both quiet for a few seconds, then Richard

brought her eyes to his. "As sad as our memories are, I think that's a good thing for us to have in common."

Merice nodded, watching him slowly bend down to kiss her, lifting her face up a bit to meet him. She heard him groan at just that small movement, those heavily muscled arms of his tightening hard around her just before he broke it off.

"I'm sitting here in my skivvies, you know, so I'm going to even things up a bit."

She went right back to tense at that, but he didn't let it deter him. And he took his time about it, deliberately, not wanting to startle her or cause her to be even more apprehensive. Using his big hands to touch the places he was going to reveal before he did so, he weaved both quick and deeper kisses in between. As he slowly disrobed her, he discovered just what he was hoping to find—she was soft and round in all the right places—which he very much liked, but he could tell that she had become more nervous despite his attempts to prevent that, and he would bet that it was because she considered herself to be fat.

The baggy t-shirt, emblazoned with the self-deprecating slogan "I'm great in bed. I can sleep for days" was the first to go, and even before it hit the ground, she was rounding her shoulders and trying to prevent him from seeing her, even though she was wearing a bra and really nothing particularly intimate had been revealed.

Richard put a hand on her bare back, feeling her start just a little at the contact, and began to rub slowly up and down. "Sit up, please, Merice. There's no need to hide from me. I think you're gorgeous, or I wouldn't be here."

A derisive snort like the one she gave would get her into trouble if they were in a relationship, and he hoped that they soon would be.

But at the moment, all he did was give her a stern look, which sent her eyes flitting away from his. He was gratified to

see that she did sit up straighter, too, though, if very tentatively.

"Good girl."

Those two, small words flooded her entire body—not just her cheeks—with a very pleasant, disarming warmth, and she felt the need to hide her face against his chest.

After kissing the top of her head and noting both how soft and sweet smelling her hair was, he moved her a bit away. "Do you want me to take your bra off for you, or do you want to do it yourself?"

It was an excellently phrased question, letting her know that it was going to happen one way or the other, but giving her the option—or was it an illusion—of a certain amount of control.

Shyly, her eyes found his. "I-I'll do it myself, please."

He nodded, then waited for her to do it as he continued to stroke her back in a manner that he hoped she found reassuring. But apparently not enough that she actually took off her bra.

He waited as long as he thought he ought to, then prompted, "Merice? Is there a problem?"

She shook her head, looking down again. "No, I'm just, uh, a bit shy. It's kind of weird, I know, but I'd rather have you touch them than look at them."

"Well, we can do that. I'll put my hands beneath your bra and cover you, then you can take it off. Would that help?"

"It might."

"Okay." His hands were so big that they covered every bit of her and then some, and her breasts were more than ample—a fact she'd spent her life trying to hide—especially considering that she was a relatively small woman. The bra had ridden upwards from his movements, and she took it off without any hesitancy at all as he continued to hide her breasts behind his hands.

Richard could feel her nipples coming to stiff peaks against his palms. "I'm going to let go now."

"A-all right."

He really wished he could convey to her that there was absolutely no reason for her to be concerned that he wouldn't like what he saw, but he acknowledged the fact that no matter how supportive and reassuring he tried to be, that might take quite some time to sink into her. So, before he removed his hands, he locked his eyes with hers, saying in a gentle voice, "Like most men, I find breasts of absolutely any kind to be incredibly arousing, and yours feel beautiful in my hands."

Then he moved them away and continued to look her in the eye before he gave her a very long, slow kiss as he trailed those hands up and over her breasts again, loving the sound she made when his fingers grazed her swollen nipples.

"Do you like having your breasts touched?" he asked.

She nodded enthusiastically.

"And your nipples?"

"Oh, Christ, yes," she breathed, making him chuckle.

"Good."

Merice wondered if his wife hadn't liked that, which might have prompted him to ask, but she wasn't about to get into that subject with him—not now, anyway.

Besides, his fingers had found her nipples, and it was amazingly close to all over for her. Usually, it took her quite a while to peak, but he'd brought her perilously close almost instantaneously, to the point that she felt herself contract once. She was having to consciously fight it off, and all he was doing was gently pinching and rolling them.

Her eyes had drifted shut on a sigh, and it was the first time that he thought he might have some success at bringing her pleasure. She was wound so tightly that he was concerned he might not be able to, but apparently his approach—which was purely instinctual—was the right one, at least so far.

Then he stopped, somewhat abruptly, and her eyes flew open, giving him a demanding look as he lifted her off his leg and set her down on her feet in front of him.

"Pants and panties, please, if you're comfortable doing them all at once."

She wasn't. It was bad enough to have to take them off in front of him, while he watched. At least he looked downright hungry for her throughout and not turned off by her body, which was something she always worried about from previous experience.

Her panties, like her sneakers, which he suggested she kick off, were pink, and covered in unicorns and crowns and wands.

"You are just too adorable for words." He smiled. Then he looked up at her—barely. Even sitting, he was almost taller than she was. "Do you want me to take your panties off, or do you want to do it?"

He expected her to be hesitant and shy and slow about revealing the last—most intimate parts—of herself. But he did not expect her to take several steps away from where she'd been standing between his legs.

"Are you scared, Merice?"

He didn't sound angry or even judgmental, but still, she couldn't help but fidget with her fingers. "No, just nervous."

"Well, I'm glad it's no more than that. I don't ever want you to be afraid of me. There's no need. I would never hurt you."

She didn't say anything to that but nodded.

"Still, I want you to come back to where you were, please." Richard pointed to the spot in front of him that she'd just vacated.

This time, while twisting her fingers practically into knots, she shook her head and said, "No."

He grinned, but there wasn't much humor in it. On the

one hand, he was glad that she felt comfortable enough with him to say no to him. On the other hand, though, he didn't want her to think that she could get away with disobeying him.

He lowered his chin and looked out at her from behind half-closed lids and a drawn brow, tone hushed but slightly hard. "I'm sorry. What did you say?"

"No," she whispered, taking another step away from him.

It crossed his mind that she was merely trying to test him, to see how he would react to her disobedience. But whether or not it was a test didn't really matter to him—it didn't change how he was going to behave.

Richard leaned his arm on his thigh as he spoke calmly but firmly. "Merice, you said that you'd not been spanked before, but if that's what you're trying to get me to do, you're on the right track. You might not have a lot of practical experience in this area, but I'm sure you know how this works. I'm dominant, and you're submissive. When I tell you to do something, I expect you to obey me, or tell me why you can't." He pinned her with his gaze. "Is there a concrete reason why you can't do as I've asked you to?"

She shook her head.

His next words sounded very regretful. "If I have to come and get you, honey, it's going to go worse for you than it will if you come here now."

Her eyes got big at that subtle revelation. "You mean, even if I come there right now, you're still going to spank me?" she asked breathlessly.

"I am, because I don't expect to have to ask you to do something more than once, nor do I expect you to directly defy me once I've asked."

That lower lip of hers was going to be raw before this evening was over.

"Still, coming to me of your own volition—acknowledging your submission if you will—will result in much less of a

spanking than if I have to get up and bring you back myself, make no mistake."

She'd read—and fantasized—about situations like this, but she never expected to find herself in one, especially not so late in life.

She knew that she should do as he'd asked. Indeed, she even took a step towards him, but she'd waited too long to do so. He'd already risen, come to her, picked her up, and sat down again, putting her over his lap and holding her there with heart stopping ease.

Merice tried several covert experiments—well, she thought they were, anyway—to see if she could find a way off his lap, but found that there really wasn't one. And, worse than that, he was not only anticipating every move she made, but he was also keeping her there with very little effort on his part. It was as if he really wasn't even paying much attention to her. Her movements were that easy for him to anticipate and control, and she found that idea undeniably annoying, but also indescribably tantalizing.

And as soon as she stopped actively trying to escape, he slipped his hands beneath the waistband of her panties and pulled them down and off her.

"No, Richard, don't!" Merice rocked her body back and forth, which inadvertently aided him in his goal, then up and down, then tried to put her closest foot on the floor. But she again found herself blocked at every turn, merely by the presence of his arm across her back.

"Put your foot back on the bed, honey, or I will rearrange you so that I can put my leg over yours, and that will solve that bit of naughtiness."

The word "naughty" used in relation to herself, as she could never remember it ever having been before, only added to her excitement. And she'd read about men doing that while spanking a woman, to keep them from kicking up, but she

never thought it would happen to her—and the first time she was spanked, too!

She definitely didn't want him to do that to her, so her foot was immediately moved back where it had been.

"Good girl."

Merice couldn't prevent a slight shiver from running through her at those words.

Richard reached down and captured her right wrist, bringing it to the small of her back and holding it there before he began to spank her without another word. And he wasn't delivering love taps. He was swatting her behind very smartly and crisply, so that she would have no doubt that this was a punishment and not merely a precursor to sex.

It didn't take very many smacks before Merice was trying to reach back with her free hand to block the connection of his palm with her behind, only to have it captured, too, and rendered useless in the defense of her backside as he continued to redden her behind without missing a beat. Within a matter of seconds, he had reduced her to an utterly defenseless state, and her mind was heady—in a pervasive sensual haze—at the realization of that fact, as well as the startling knowledge that she wasn't in the least afraid of not being able to protect herself from him in any way, which only added to her desire.

She'd always sworn she'd never cry when she was spanked—she wasn't a child, she was an adult, and not a lot of things made her cry—not in front of anyone, anyway. When she was alone, she cried at everything from YouTube videos about rescued dogs to Budweiser horse commercials. But she was in tears, real, dripping down her face and making her nose run, tears before he'd crested the twelve spank mark, and he showed absolutely no signs of stopping, either.

Much more quickly than her ego could bear, she was openly weeping. It didn't feel in the least abusive. She didn't

feel beaten, but she most certainly did feel spanked—punished—corrected.

She had no idea how long it went on. It seemed like decades, but in reality was probably less than five minutes. Still, he was quite skillful and determined, and not one iota of his efforts went to waste. He reddened her derriere quite thoroughly from stem to stern, leaving it pretty evenly distributed, angry carmine red before he stopped, his big hand resting on her cringing, stinging bottom.

"So what are you going to do the next time I ask you to do something, Merice?"

The scolding lecture was almost as bad as the spanking itself, especially coming from him.

"Do it."

"Obey," he corrected.

As much as she knew that she was pushing it, Merice delayed her response for a full beat, earning herself another five swats that made her immediately regret having done so before she chanted, "Obey! Obey! Obey!"

"Good." She found herself immediately moved into his arms and held there while he comforted her with his hands and his voice and the simple, soothing presence of his big body against hers.

From there, as he felt her relax, her breathing returned to normal, until he moved her again, into a position in which he could easily explore her most intimate spots with his mouth.

And the first time those soft, eager lips found her, her mind utterly deserted her. The only things that existed for her were him and his lips and tongue.

All reticence and hesitancy had fled with her overactive mind, and she was much the happier for it, and so was he. When she was reduced to a mass of throbbing need, there was no shyness, no body consciousness, no concerns about whether or not she was attractive to him. She began to beg him for

release almost from the first moment he'd touched her there, and he found himself grinning against her overheated flesh as his tongue relentlessly worried her clit.

His fingers were far from lazy, too. They found her entrance—one that was sopping wet, of course, which let him know that she definitely enjoyed being spanked, despite her protestations to the contrary—and pressed themselves slowly inside her, watching and listening for any sounds of distress, but the low moans she was emitting weren't that.

"I want you to come, baby," he murmured against her thigh as he watched her writhe while he plunged his fingers in and out of her.

She'd held herself off for so long that her response wasn't a lie. "I-I'm not sure I can."

"Does what I'm doing feel good to you?"

"Oh, hell, yes!"

"Good. I certainly want you to come, but there's no time limit."

"You'll get bored or sore or something—"

"Absolutely not, on either count. I love bringing a woman off with my mouth, so I have pretty infinite patience. If there's something else I can do to help you get there, just let me know, but as I said, I don't care how long it takes. I could very happily spend the rest of the night right here."

In the meantime, he eagerly returned to what he had been doing.

Surprisingly, Merice didn't think he was trying to pull the wool over her eyes, so she allowed herself to relax just a bit more than she had been, and that was all it took.

Several minutes later, she gripped the comforter in her hands as if it was a lifeline, then asked in a whisper, as if she thought he was going to be mad or say no or something, "Can I touch you? Your head?"

"Of course!" Richard reached up and guided her fingers into his hair as he continued to flick her with his tongue.

As attuned to her as he was trying to be, he thought he knew when she'd turned the corner, her fingers gripping his hair near the scalp, hips rising to meet his mouth and tongue, head rolling back and forth as she moaned, slowly at first, then more quickly, until it morphed into a scream at the last and she lost control, crying out, hands slamming down on the bed as she scrunched up the comforter in them while her body convulsed violently at his behest.

He didn't let up immediately, either, as some men did who were in a hurry to bring an end to an experience that they found less than pleasant. Richard continued to lap the flat of his tongue over her slowly, knowing she must've been excruciatingly sensitive, but not wanting her to lose that edge, either, hoping to prolong it and expand her bliss into much more for her.

When she had recovered a little, breath still coming in small pants, he lifted his head and gave her a self-satisfied, shit eating grin, offering, "More?"

Merice couldn't get herself together enough to give him a coherent answer, so he took it upon himself to create that same maelstrom for her again, and then again, until she could barely move, except to raise her hands and shake her head in surrender when he again offered another round.

With what little was left of her mind, she expected that he would join them together as soon as he'd stretched himself out over her, but instead, he rolled the two of them over, so that he was on the bottom. Then he arranged her—like the rag doll he'd turned her into—until she was lying atop him, instead.

Merice gave him a look that questioned her ability to do what he was asking but he just grinned up at her. "I promise you don't have to do anything, and with the way I'm feeling, I'm not going to have to do much, either. I'll do all the work."

She nodded her head, as if he had asked her for permission, which he hadn't, as he wrapped his arms around her, that very large, very ready part of him seeking her warmth and finding it unerringly.

The sheer size of his broad head as it pressed against her gave her a start, but he was holding her—not necessarily tightly, but without giving her much ability to avoid such insistent probing. Then he literally sank himself into her, pressing her down onto himself as he raised his hips to meet her, forcing her open around him.

It didn't hurt, exactly, and she could hardly claim that it was unexpected. But it was a tight fit, and it brought her to a kind of awareness of her body that she'd rarely experienced. Her eyes went round, and she could feel him watching her with an embarrassing level of intensity as she mewled softly and grabbed at his biceps, which were much too large for her to get a good hold on.

He stopped immediately, to his credit, and said, "Am I hurting you?"

Her eyes were closed, her breathing ragged, and she was concentrating on keeping her body as relaxed as possible, but she couldn't—in all honesty—say that he was. "No, just... wow."

He was silent after that, and Merice opened her eyes to find him blushing. Still, he said, "I'm sorry. I'll go more slowly."

"No, I didn't say that. It's just been a while, and you're very, uh, well endowed."

"Thank you."

He continued to—more slowly and deliberately—take her, and it made her excruciatingly aware of how he was claiming possession of her body, and that beyond his own sense of honor, for which she was grateful, there was very little she could do to stop him. And that idea turned her on to no end.

When he finally could move no farther, he pulsed against her several times, forcing her open just the slightest bit more, and pulling a groan from her that sounded like it belonged on Pornhub.

"Like that, do you?" he asked through his already labored breaths.

All she could do was bury her face against his chest and nod, but he wouldn't allow that. A big hand came up and wrapped itself in her hair, holding her head back as he nibbled at her neck while a big hand on her sore bottom kept her still so that he could pump into her with long, powerful strokes.

He very much wanted to feel her come around him, but even though the fingers of his free hand found her clit—which was soaking wet with her own juices—he knew he couldn't hold himself back any longer. Seconds later, she saw him grimace, as if he was in terrible pain, as he groaned loudly, hands on her hips to keep her right where he wanted her as he drove himself into her, taking as much pleasure from her as he could until he finally fell bonelessly back onto the bed.

Merice wasn't exactly sure what she should do. Should she stay right where she was, atop him? Should she move to the side? Should she dismount and leave, or stay, hoping for a part deux?

In the end, she moved off him, because she considered herself too heavy to stay there for very long, and was in the act of sitting up, wondering where her clothes had landed, when she felt a finger trace its way slowly down her back.

"Feeling pumpkiny again, Ella?" he asked, still sounding short of breath.

She had to smile at his continued reference to her being Cinderella. "I just don't want to overstay my welcome."

"Have I said that I want you to leave?"

"No, but you're a nice guy, and maybe you wouldn't say that, even if you wanted me to leave."

He laughed at that. "I'm not that nice a guy, to put up with someone I don't want to have around me. I'm too old and life is too short for that shit. Do you have to be home for some reason?"

Her cat would miss her, but he'd get over it.

"No."

"Do you want to go home?" Richard curled himself around where she was sitting on the edge of the bed, as if perched there for a quick getaway.

Merice sighed. "That's not—that's not what I'm concerned about. I just don't want to be where I'm not wanted."

"Well, then, you have nothing to worry about," he stated in what he hoped was a reassuring manner. He wanted to ask her if some asshole had thrown her out of his bed in the past, but he didn't think he had a right to do that. Well, really, he just didn't want to upset her. He already felt like he had the right to ask her questions like that, although he wasn't at all sure that she would agree with him, necessarily.

With that, he hauled her back onto the bed and arranged himself on his back, with her lying against him. She was on her back, too, really just overlapping him a bit. He liked it when a woman lay on her side, with her head on his shoulder, but he was aware of not being too controlling and was just happy that she hadn't fled into the night.

He opened his mouth, wanting to touch base with her about how the sex had been for her, but before he could get a word out, he heard the soft sound of baby snores, and he felt his heart clench, once, painfully.

Anita had snored just like that, not that she'd ever admit it.

But this wasn't Anita. It was Merice, and they were in some ways very much alike, but in others very different.

Anita didn't have a shy or awkward bone in her body. She was almost too frank for some people's comfort, and that

unfettered mouth of her was the single character flaw that was most likely to get her upended over his lap.

Merice was a different kind of woman—not better or worse, just different—and her hesitancy, her anxiety, made him feel needed, somehow, and he liked that.

For the first time in a long while, Richard fell asleep naturally, without having to take melatonin, which he'd been relying on since he'd lost Anita, to help him get to sleep every night.

But still, he slept lightly, and woke instantly when he felt her sit up in the middle of the night.

"You okay?" he asked, turning on the light so that if she needed the bathroom, she'd be able to see her way to it.

When she turned to him, she was very nearly in tears. "Oh my God, I'm so sorry!"

"About what?" he asked, scootching closer to her.

"I fell asleep on you! I've never been so mortified in my entire life!"

"Why? I'm not mortified about it. In fact, I'm kinda proud."

That had the desired effect of making her stop in the tracks of her downward emotional spiral. "Proud? You can't possibly be proud of a woman falling asleep right after you've made love to her."

His tone was no nonsense when he answered, "You don't know me well enough to say that, Merice. I consider it a compliment that I tired you out enough, and that you felt comfortable enough around me on such short acquaintance, to fall asleep in my bed."

She frowned, as if she didn't like the idea that he wasn't horrified at all at what she'd done.

So, partly in order to stop her from perseverating about that thought, he reached out and lifted her back into the bed.

"What are you doing?" she exclaimed.

Richard tucked her beneath him as he pulled the covers over both of them so that she wouldn't catch a chill. "Making love to you again."

He paused for just a second while looking down at her, as if challenging her to object.

But her Momma hadn't raised no fools.

It was a nice surprise when she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him, saying in the closest thing he'd heard to a submissive tone from her, "Okay."

He made a mental note that, at some point in the future, he was going to introduce her to the phrase, "Yes, Sir," but not now.

Definitely not now.

Chapter 3

The next morning—a Sunday—she awoke from a very deep sleep, in a bed she didn't recognize, in a room she didn't recognize, next to a man she didn't recognize at first, and sat straight up trying to remember how she'd ended up there, and where "there" was, exactly.

He was instantly awake and rolled towards her. "All right?" he asked.

Seeing him brought it all back to her. Her hand immediately went to her hair, which she knew looked like hell. It had a mind of its own on the best days, but first thing in the morning, it always looked like she had a haystack on top of her head. "Oh. It's you."

Chuckling like that, all warm and low and sexy, shouldn't be allowed so early in the morning, she decided.

"Should I be insulted that you didn't remember me at first?"

"No. I just don't usually sleep over, especially not the first time I'm with a man."

"I'm honored."

That was a lovely thing to say, she had to admit, but still, it

annoyed her for some reason, although she couldn't have said why.

Merice slid farther over the edge of the bed, but not for long. Seconds later, she found herself lying next to him again, on her back, his arm remaining around her waist.

"Richard." He wasn't the only one who could sound stern.

Although he didn't sound nearly as concerned about it as she was when he did. "Yes, Merice?" he asked in a tone that conveyed total innocence.

"Are you going to let me go?"

"Well," he said, sounding expansive, "it *is* Sunday. You don't have work, do you? I thought we could spend the day together. In bed, preferably, but I'm amenable to going out somewhere, as long as we end up back in bed at some point during the day."

"No, I don't, but that's beside the point."

"I make a killer breakfast in bed. Or we could go out for breakfast, maybe take in a movie or go for a stroll on the beach."

She frowned. "The beach is at least two hours from here."

He just grinned. "Did I forget to mention that I like to drive?"

"That's not a Sunday drive. That's akin to the Oregon Trail."

"So, no long drives?"

Merice sighed audibly. "Richard."

"Yes?"

Damn his pleasant personality! She was an early riser, but she was rarely happy about it. She had a feeling that he wasn't, either, naturally, and yet there he was, smiling at her beatifically.

"I take it you don't have to work on Sundays?"

He just grinned. "One of the few perks of being the boss. No shift work, unless there's some kind of special case going

on." He frowned. "And, come to think of it, there might well be as of this week. I'll have to see what shakes out. We might have to postpone our Saturday outing."

"That's okay."

He wished she wasn't so blasé about it. He may have only just met her, but he already wanted to see her any time he could. Hell, he'd like to keep her right where she was for the rest of her life, although it would definitely be in direct conflict with his job to do so. Still, the impulse was there. He liked her, a lot—neurosis, crankiness in the morning, and all. Everyone had their quirks, and if hers weren't any worse than this, he considered himself lucky, especially considering how compatible they were on a purely physical basis.

"Well, like I said, we might not, but something big might be going down at some point this week, and I might need to be around the office next weekend. There's the possibility we'll have to reschedule."

She thought, *gee, could you be a bit more vague?* but she didn't say it. "Yup. Fine with me."

He decided that he needed to get off that subject, or he was going to become depressed. "So? What do you think about my idea of spending the day together?"

She opened her mouth, then looked down. Nothing came out. Then she looked up at him. "I was going to say that I need to get home, but I don't. I clean my cat's litter box every day, and he's got enough dry food in his dish and water in his bowl to last him 'til winter. The truth is that I *want* to go home—not because of anything you've said or done. You've been obnoxiously nice. It's really very annoying to those of us who aren't."

He gave her a lopsided grin at that.

Merice drew a deep breath. "But in case you haven't noticed, or neither Jenny nor Jake told you, I'm not a very social person. And over the past eighteen hours or so, I've

been just about as social as I've been over the entire past decade, and it's, frankly, exhausting. I don't know how much longer I can continue to do it. I need to go home, where I'm ultimately the most comfortable, and where I can be my real self without having to worry that what I'm saying or doing is going to annoy, disgust, or offend someone else—or all three at once—and recharge my batteries before I have to go into work and be social at a place where I get paid actual money to do so."

She'd been a little worried that he might take offense at what she'd said, but instead he was laughing.

"You are a pip."

"I think a more accurate description is that I'm a drip, but I'll take the compliment."

"I don't think you know how to take a compliment, but we can work on that," he informed her casually. "What can I do to make this place more comfortable for you—anything?"

She sighed. "Bottom line? No. It's new, it's got you in it and you're new, too, and it's not my place. And I know I just insulted you terribly, and I'm sorry, but I'm just trying to tell you the truth—my truth."

"I'm not insulted, or disgusted, or offended. It would take a lot more than something like that to accomplish that feat. I don't understand how you feel, but I want to be empathetic about it, but I also really want to get to know you better."

He didn't expect the small, almost sad smile she gave him. "Do you know how far you've already gotten with me? I do not go out to diners with strange men after a party. I go straight home and thank God I got through it and begin worrying about the next one. I do not sleep with men on impulse when I just met them seventeen seconds ago. And I most definitely do not fall asleep in a strange bed. That is a huge compliment to you and how comfortable you've managed to make me feel around you."

He was absolutely beaming at that.

"And, frankly, it says an awful lot about how good you are in bed, too."

The look she gave him when he let out a triumphant war whoop at that was that of a nun confronting a pornographic picture.

"Sorry. I was going to ask you about that, but then I was spending my time trying to get you not to bolt out of here and to spend the day with me, instead." He tilted his head. "Any chance you might if I promise not to keep you tied to the bed?"

Her pupils dilated at that idea, and he was glad he'd decided to look into them when he said it. He had a feeling that she wouldn't necessarily be all that forthcoming about what she liked or wanted—that he would have to be as much of a detective with her as he was at work, but that was okay. He liked puzzles, and she definitely fit the bill.

She laughed nervously. "I'm sorry. I don't think so."

"Okay, then, but let's at least have breakfast together."

"Well, it is my favorite meal of the day..."

"Wonderful. We could go out, or I could cook us something here. Your choice."

"Do you know that little place off 46? The one that's literally tucked into a corner of that plaza?"

"I do! They have great breakfasts and cinnamon rolls the size of hub caps."

As if she was imparting a state secret to him, she leaned into him and whispered, "They have cinnamon roll pancakes, too, and real maple syrup."

"Done and done!"

He let her go, and they each sat up on their side of the bed.

"Would it be all right with you if I showered before we left?" She didn't really want to shower in a strange place, but it

was her habit to do so daily, and she liked to stick to a schedule as closely as possible. Doing so, made her feel safe and in control, regardless of however much of a delusion that was.

"Of course! I'll put some clean towels in the bathroom. I want to shower, too, but ladies first."

She was ensconced in the bathroom and had just turned on the shower when he heard a shriek of pure fear—and not just one, but a continual cacophony of them.

Richard stood at the door and yelled to her, his hand already on the knob. "Merice? Are you okay?"

She didn't answer him, just continued to shriek.

"I'm coming in." He didn't know why he announced himself. He'd seen her naked already, but still.

She was sitting on the floor, as far away from the shower stall as she could get without being in the bedroom, sobbing and shaking uncontrollably.

He knelt on one knee beside her, but didn't touch her, not wanting to make things worse. "Honey, what is it? Did you fall? Are you sick? What happened?"

She was damned near catatonic but managed to motion with a trembling hand towards the shower stall. "S-s-s—"

He immediately popped his head into the stall and looked around. He'd used it yesterday. It had seemed fine, and he couldn't find anything wrong now, either. The spray was fine, not too hot, not too cold, it was clean, there was a mat down to prevent slipping, the glass door wasn't broken, the fixtures were all working.

He returned to crouch down next to her. "Answer me, please, Merice. Are you sick?"

She shook her head as she continued to cry and whimper.

"Are you hurt?"

More head shaking.

"I don't know what the problem is, honey, so I can't help solve it."

"S-s-s—" she tried again before bringing her hands to her face. She could barely get the word out, and when it did, it was accompanied by a full body shudder. "S-spider!"

"Oh. Can you tell me where it was?"

Richard watched her swallow hard, then make several failed attempts to answer him.

But she kept trying, and eventually got it out. "T-Top l-left c-c-corner."

He was loath to leave her, but he also wanted to alleviate the problem, too. There were, occasionally, what he called "shower spiders" in the corners of the stall, but as long as they didn't bother him, he didn't bother them. It wasn't as if there was a ton of insect activity in those locations, so they didn't tend to last long there—they either moved or died.

Richard put his hand firmly on her arm. "I'm going to go take care of it, and I'll make sure that there aren't any others elsewhere, too. It won't take me long. I'll be right back."

He hoped that his words would reassure her, but she was still shivering and shaking just as hard, and even when he returned after pronouncing it safe, she didn't seem to take much comfort in that pronouncement and was still just sitting there trembling.

"All gone, I promise," he said, sitting down next to her. "I'm sorry you were scared."

It might not have looked like it to him, but Merice had been working on trying to tamp down what she knew was an irrational fear. "S-so am I. It's r-ridiculous for a grown woman, I know, but I've been terrified of bugs all my life."

"Just to be clear, all bugs?"

She nodded. "Anything that flies or might crawl into bed and throw four legs over me. Pretty much every bug except perhaps ladybugs."

"Okay. I'll remember that." He didn't sound angry or frustrated, or like he thought she was crazy, either. "Do you want

me to stay in here while you shower? Or join you, or something?"

"I-I think I just want to go home."

He wished she didn't feel she had to leave, especially in her current condition. He was going to worry about her. But he didn't say any of that. "I understand. You're white as a sheet, though, and you're going to shake yourself right apart. Are you sure you want to go? Or I'd be glad to come home with you and stay with you for a while? I'd be glad to do a sweep of your place for little intruders, too, if you like."

She got awkwardly to her feet before he could offer her a hand, saying primly, "No, thank you."

Merice wandered into the bedroom and began to get dressed. Richard did the same thing and was unable to stop himself from asking the question that was in his head.

"What do you do when you're alone and there's a bug in the house?" He saw her shudder at the mere question.

"I have multiple cans of bug killer in literally every room of my house."

"Oh. Well, I guess I now know the answer to the question about whether or not you're an outdoorsy type, then."

She gave him a wan smile, but he could see that she was still showing signs that she was terrified, and the thought of her being so afraid made his chest hurt.

When she was fully clothed, he walked up to her and pulled her slowly into his arms, holding her tightly against him. "You don't have to face them alone, you know. Even if we should never see each other again, which I fervently hope does not happen, if you're ever too scared to handle a creepy-crawly by yourself, you have only to call—any time, day or night—and I'll come over and do battle with it for you."

He heard her give an almost chuckle, and he hoped he'd portrayed himself as some sort of weird, pesticide slinging,

knight in shining armor/old west sheriff, with cans of Raid in his holsters where his six shooters should be.

And he had. He'd also made her think about the fact that he was apparently hoping that this wasn't going to be a one night stand.

So was she, not that she could admit that to him now, or probably at any point in the future, either, even if they ended up being together for a hundred years.

"Thank you for that generous offer."

"But you'll never call me," he stated astutely, searching her eyes.

She blushed at his unerringly accurate statement. "How is it that you know me so well already?"

"Just an educated guess." Richard leaned a bit away from her to give her a scolding look. "But be forewarned, Cinderelly, that if you're my submissive, I would expect you to call me in that situation or whenever you needed help, and if I ever found out that you hadn't, you would be facing some extremely uncomfortable consequences."

Probably not the best thing to say to her at the moment—to threaten her with a future spanking she was very likely going to earn at some point—but then again, it gave her something besides the spider to worry about.

"Yes, but... I'm not your submissive." It was a declarative sentence, not a question, one devoid of the wistfulness she felt about it, but didn't necessarily want to reveal to him. "So I don't have to worry about that."

He hadn't necessarily intended that their discussion would get quite this heavy this quickly, considering how upset she'd just been, but he wasn't one to shy away from topics that meant something to him, however surprising it was to find himself wanting to offer her that position after less than twenty-four hours of knowing her.

But Richard's instincts about people had rarely let him down, and he trusted them now. "But would you like to be?"

She smiled while she said it, but he didn't like what she said at all. "You mean do I want to sign up to get my ass beat on the regular?"

His frown was deep and more than somewhat intimidating. "That wasn't how I made you feel when I spanked you, I hope. That certainly was not my goal—never would be—for that—"

Merice held up her hand. "No, you didn't. I'm sorry. I was just trying to be funny, with my usual bad sense of timing."

He straightened to his full height, looking down his nose at her. "Not funny, Merice."

"I'm sorry. I really am," she replied immediately with absolutely no hesitation.

Before she had a chance to say anything further, she was being held at his side, with his arm around her waist as she was forcibly bent over. She hadn't gotten to the point of putting on her pants yet, so she was in her shirt, bra, and panties, none of which afforded her the slightest bit of protection from what his hand was doing to her, which was setting her backside ablaze.

No spankings at all over her forty-eight year life span, and now she'd been spanked two days in a row. As much as she hated it and it hurt like the dickens, she loved it that much, too, and wondered what she'd done to be lucky enough to meet him.

It was a very thorough, very deliberate, spanking, each swat delivered precisely where he wanted it to be, back and forth—first one cheek, then the other—and each hard swat encompassing the entirety of the cheek on which it landed.

She couldn't kick up, because she was still standing, precariously at best, and she didn't trust him not to drop her. So she kept both feet firmly on the floor. Nor could she rear

up or escape even a single swat because his impossibly strong arm around her waist prevented much movement on her part.

All she could do to register her displeasure was groan as his broad, flat palm cracked loudly against her rapidly reddening and sore skin, try to pant through the pain, and weep piteously and copiously. He had effortlessly removed any ability she might have thought she'd had to resist the urge to cry like a baby, reducing her to such in a humiliatingly short amount of time, although she continued her futile—and weakening—attempts to escape his justice.

And she'd thought the spanking he'd given her yesterday was bad. It was a walk in the park in comparison to this one.

Even as he was physically chastising her, he thought that this was probably not the right thing to do—punishing her as they were just starting to discuss her becoming his submissive. But then again, it gave her an idea of what being in that position was going to be like, so, it was probably exactly what he should be doing. It could easily tip the scales away from her accepting him as her dominant. Regardless, he was doing it anyway.

If wasn't until many swats beyond the moment that he felt her go limp against him and dissolve into tears that his hand was finally still, but he continued to hold her that way, too—the same hand that had wreaked havoc on her flesh still covering her hot butt possessively—proudly, almost.

"Do you feel beaten, Merice?" he asked pointedly.

"No," she sniffed.

"No? Even though this was a pretty strict punishment?"

"No."

"Good." He allowed her to stand up but not walk away from him, and as she was in the very act of rubbing her butt, he pulled her against him again, brushed her hands aside and replaced them with his own.

Somehow, she found it terribly embarrassing for him to be rubbing the bottom he'd just blistered, not that he'd asked.

"So. While your backside is still throbbing, I hope, and for the second time," she got the distinct idea that he did not like to repeat himself by his emphasis on the word "second", "I'm asking you, do you want to be my submissive?"

Her backside was bucking for her to say no and tell him to go pound sand. But the rest of her was clamoring for her to give him an unequivocal, loud, and enthusiastic, 'Yes!' Instead, she asked, "Is that the same thing as your girlfriend, to you?"

He appeared to ruminate on that one for a moment, then said, "Well, I think they're pretty interchangeable. I care about my sub and my girlfriend, I make love to my girlfriend and my sub—although I might be less gentle with my sub, occasionally—and I like to spend time with both of them. So, yes, not exactly the same, but pretty darned close. Are the terms 'boyfriend' and 'Dom' interchangeable to you?"

"Pretty much so. Like you said, there are some differences, but not a lot, and I want them to be the same."

"So, if you're agreeing to be my sub, you're also becoming my girlfriend."

"I guess so."

"Well?" In some things, he could play the long game and have almost infinite patience to get what he wanted. But with something like this, that meant a lot more to him than he was letting on, he wanted her answer now, so that it was decided and out of the way. He already felt as if it was, but he wanted her acknowledgement of it.

She was staring at his chest and holding her breath as she answered him. "I-I would like to apply for both positions, please."

Richard tipped her chin up and gave her a long, lingering kiss, separating their lips very slowly and reluctantly at the end to say, "They're both yours for the taking, as am I."

Chapter 4

"I can't make it Saturday," Richard announced over the phone when he called her Wednesday night.

He'd called her every day since she'd left his place on Sunday, even that evening, although they'd seen each other only a few hours before. Merice wasn't sure how she'd like a guy doing that—she thought she might find it a bit clingy—but he wasn't that way about it at all. He didn't come off as needy in the least, because he rarely focused the conversation on himself. He was always asking questions about her, as if he wanted to learn everything about her all at once—screw the learning curve—which was surprising, too, because he didn't strike her as a particularly impatient man, just the opposite, in fact.

The first thing Richard had learned about her was not to call her after ten at night. Her phone had rung close to eleven.

"Hello?" The only reason she'd even answered, rather than letting it go to voicemail, was because it was from him. There were very few people on the list of those whose calls would actually be allowed past her "do not disturb" parameters, after nine-thirty at night or before five-thirty in the morning. But

luckily, she had added him as an exception that afternoon, once she got home.

Richard immediately knew by the sound of her voice that he'd made a mistake, and unlike a lot of men, he was far from averse to admitting that he had. "Oh, baby, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to wake you up."

"It's all right."

She yawned in his ear, making him chuckle and imagine her curled up, all warm and snuggly in her bed, wishing she was there, beside him in his big bed.

"You go back to sleep, hon. I didn't call about anything important. I just wanted to touch base with you and make sure that you were all right."

Merice was suddenly hit with the thought of how amazing it was to have someone care about her so overtly. They'd ended up making love on Sunday—a slow burn that just about singed every molecule she owned before he was done with her—after he'd spanked her, but she had left right afterwards. Richard had seemed reluctant to allow her to do that, but he did follow her home, then went inside the house and did a sweep for bugs, pronouncing it safe for her to enter. Then he'd hugged her hard, kissed her goodbye, and headed to his car, cautioning her to lock the door behind her.

It was easy to obey him in that, since she had been going to do it anyway, whether he was there or not, after floating into her house on cloud nine.

As much as she did enjoy all of that attention being lavished on her, though, she had, of course, worried that that might be an indication of other potential problems with him. She worried—of course, because she worried about everything compulsively—that he might become overly controlling or obsessed or overbearing. But he hadn't emailed, phoned, texted, or messaged her once all afternoon, so she didn't

consider a phone call at the end of the night—well, the end of his night, probably—to be too much.

"It's okay. And I'm fine, thanks."

"I'm glad. I want you to go back to sleep, though. I totally forgot you go to bed early."

"Yeah, I have to be up for work at five-thirty."

"Oh dear. My condolences."

That got a chuckle out of her.

"Sleep well, Merice."

"You, too, Richard."

She was again surprised when he sent a huge bouquet of roses to her workplace, too, which garnered a lot of attention from her coworkers. She called the number he had given her for his work phone as soon as she received them but got voice-mail, so she left a typically awkward message of thanks.

That evening, he called again, at seven rather than eleven.

"I'm not interrupting your dinner, am I?" he asked immediately.

"No. Everyone in my family either worked or went to school or both, so we ate really early. Like farmer early, no later than five."

"Wow. My family ate at seven or so, and so did Anita and I. Nowadays, I'm less scheduled, and I eat whenever."

"I pretty much stick to a schedule, even when I'm not working."

Considering what he knew about her, he would expect nothing less from her. "I can understand that. So you liked the flowers?"

"I did. Everyone kept stopping by my desk to smell them and ask who sent them."

Even though there was nothing in her voice now, or in the message she'd left earlier, to indicate that she was anything but happy with the roses, Richard could have smacked himself at the realization that came to him.

"Oh, crap. I'm so sorry."

"Sorry? Sorry about what?"

"I didn't think. Anita was always so happy when I sent flowers to her work because she liked all of that attention. But that's not your bag, and I should have thought of that before I sent them."

Merice was amazed that he had even thought about that at all. "No, I was fine with it."

He was silent for a moment, then asked in a rumbly, stern tone, "You're not lying to me about that, are you, Merice?"

"N-no." Her answer came out much more tentatively than she wanted it to. "I'm not. It's not easy for me to be the center of attention, you're right about that, but if I'm truthful, that is definitely offset by the fact that it makes some of my coworkers jealous."

Richard laughed at her confession. "All right then. I suppose I can't punish you when you're that honest with me."

"I'd have to agree with you about that."

"I'll bet you would. Is your little bottom still sore from that last spanking?"

She wasn't an idiot. "Oh yes, terribly, terribly sore. I could barely sit on it all day. Had to put two—no three—pillows on my chair—"

More chuckling. "All right. I get the picture. You recover quickly. I'll remember that."

"Dammit. That backfired on me rather spectacularly."

"All okay after you noticed Charlotte?"

She wanted to say, 'Huh, what?' but it came out the much less idiotic sounding, "Charlotte who?"

"Oh. I'll bet you didn't read that book because of who the main character is. Charlotte's Web, by E.B. White."

"Oh hell no. Didn't read the book, didn't see the movie. Hard no. Although I was a bookworm growing up—still am—"

and I read pretty much everything else I could get my hands on."

"Except A Cricket in Time's Square, too, I'd bet?"

"Stop!"

"All right," he laughed, then asked seriously, "but you've recovered fully?"

"Yes, thanks. Again, I'm sorry about freaking out like that."

"No need to apologize, baby. Really. I'm just glad you hadn't slipped and fallen or anything like that. Bugs, I can handle. But I would be horrified if you got hurt."

That was lovely to hear from him and made her feel all warm inside. Then she thought about how dangerous his occupation was. "I'd feel the same way if you got hurt, too."

Richard got that same feeling himself and thought that hearing it from her was a good step in the right direction.

The call on Wednesday night began with him telling her that he wasn't going to be able to make their date on Saturday. "I'm sorry, hon, but duty calls."

"That's okay. What I planned to do can be easily rescheduled." She hoped, but she was pretty sure it could.

"Care to enlighten me?"

"No. I think I'll keep it a surprise."

"Hmm. Intriguing."

She laughed, and he vowed to try to help her do more of that, hopefully by alleviating some of her fears. Stress was not good for the body, and he was determined to pare some of it down for her, as best he could, by trying to help her feel safe, even when she wasn't with him.

"Well, I don't know how you'll feel about it. It's one of my favorite activities, but keep in mind that I thought of this when I was trying to weed you out as a potential boyfriend, so I don't know if you'll like it or not. It's not for everyone."

"Huh." He didn't much like hearing that her original impulse was to try to jettison him at the first opportunity, but

at least she no longer felt that way—apparently. "Can you give me a clue?"

"Hmmm. You'll need to bring a jacket."

His eyebrows rose in surprise. "It takes place outside?"

"It does."

"I thought you weren't the outdoorsy type, seeing as it's full of bugs?"

"I know, but this isn't."

He had no idea what she had planned outdoors that didn't have the very real possibility of swarms of insects. "Mysteri-ou-er and mysteri-ou-er. But you're not going to tell me anything more, are you?"

"Nope."

He cleared his throat and adopted an officious air. "I'll have you know that I'm trained in interrogation techniques."

"I'll have you know that you haven't met stubborn until you've met me."

"Ooh. I do like a challenge."

The way he said that made her tummy flutter nervously. "So, do you mean that the entire weekend is out?"

"Fraid so, honey."

"I was thinking about moving it to Sunday, but that won't work."

He liked that she was still trying to finagle a time when they could get together. "I have a ton of time off saved up. I'd be glad to take a day off next week if conditions at the department permit. How about you?"

"I could do that. Lemme see what I can arrange and get back to you about it."

"Plan it for the end of next week, huh? I might well be incommunicado 'til then. Don't think I'm ignoring you, or that I don't care about you because I haven't called. This is a very big deal, and I'm going to be deep into work for a few days."

"Okay, I won't."

He realized that she probably wouldn't have thought that even if he'd never mentioned it to her, but he still felt obligated to do so. He swallowed hard, then asked, "Is it too soon in the relationship to say that I miss you?"

"Might be."

"Well, I don't really care. I miss you."

"That's lovely to hear, thank you."

"But you don't miss me," he prompted, wishing he didn't feel the need to.

He went there. She had hoped he wouldn't, but then he just did. "Richard, I'm a different person from you. I don't become attached as easily as you do, which is neither good nor bad. It's just the way I am."

"I know, and I didn't mean to imply that you not missing me is a negative, and I'm sorry if it came out that way."

"Still, I like you more than any other man I've ever met."

He perked up at that. "You do?"

She could hear the smile in his voice. "Yes. And I do miss the sex."

"I'll take that. And Christ, so do I," he confessed, his tone guttural. "Something fierce."

That was the last call she received, though, until the Wednesday of the next week. Their roles had reversed, and even though she knew he wouldn't be able to answer her, she began to leave voicemails for him at about seven every night. They were much less flowery than his calls were, but she tried to convey—without coming out and saying so—that she did find herself missing him, and even missed him checking up on her.

Just as she had taken her phone into her hand to call him, it rang. It was him, and he sounded exhausted, his voice lower and slower than usual. "Hello, honey."

"Hi, Richard. Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I am, but I'm getting too old for this crap. I'm

bushed. I might well take a page out of your book and go to bed early tonight—like right after this conversation. But I wanted to check in on you. I got your voicemails. Good girl for leaving them. It gave me something to look forward to at the end of every long, exhausting day."

"Can you tell me what it's all about?"

"I could, but then I'd have to kill you. So no."

Hearing her laugh was—almost, along with her voicemails—all the balm he needed. Richard dearly wished she was there with him tonight. Not because he wanted to fuck her, although he definitely did, not that he'd have the strength to do so. It was more because he didn't want to be alone. Some of what was going on at the moment in the department—in regards to that one case in particular—was damned hard to be a part of, even after all these years in police work.

He knew everyone in the department, and they were working with several local agencies as well as federal agents, too, and he'd known damned near every one of them for decades, too. They'd all been through some dangerous situations together. But this one took the cake.

It made him feel as if he was living in a third world country and not the U.S., and that made him uneasy about everyone's safety, including his own. And including Merice's.

He very much wished that he had waited until all of this was resolved before becoming involved with her, but all of his innate pragmatism had been lost as soon as he'd seen her coming across Jake and Jenny's living room towards him. That was all she wrote. And he couldn't rightly say that he regretted it—he just didn't want her to, either.

On his third yawn, she told him to go to bed.

"I'm sorry, honey, but I think I'm going to have to, or I'm going to fall asleep while we're talking."

"No need to be sorry. Go to bed and get some sleep."

"Listen, I've got tomorrow and Friday off as comp time for

this marathon we just pulled. Do you think we could arrange to go on that date you had planned on Friday? I need to take Thursday to rest and recover, but by Friday, I'll be raring to go again."

"I'll see what I can do."

"Thanks. Sleep well and behave."

"You, too." She chuckled. "Even though you can misbehave all you want and no one is going to call you on it."

"No, I just have to live with the guilt of knowing I did something wrong. You have someone who will expunge that guilt and free you from it."

She'd never thought of it that way.

"Night, baby."

"Night, Richard."

It was five o'clock the next afternoon when there was a knock on his door. He'd just gotten up—again—about an hour previously. He'd slept like the dead all night, literally from the point at which he'd hung up from talking to Merice, until about nine in the morning or so, gotten up, eaten breakfast and lounged around for a while, then went back to bed about eleven and napped until four. And now someone was trying to beat down his door.

"Hold your horses, for crying out loud. I'm on my way!"

And when he opened it, he realized why the person was so anxious that he come to the door. It was Merice, and she was weighed down with bags and boxes and bundles that hung off her arms all the way from her wrists to her shoulders on both arms. She looked like a Sherpa going up Mount Everest or a pack mule going down the Grand Canyon.

"Let me help you with all of that," he said, relieving her of most of her burdens, so that she only had one bag for each

hand by the time he got through. He led them into the kitchen as if he wasn't carrying anything, where he hefted the stuff onto the counter, then turned back to her.

Merice deposited her meager remainders next to his, then, before she could begin unpacking, she found herself enfolded into his arms and given a warm, hard kiss that set the parts of her that were very susceptible to him on fire, when she—naively, she supposed—hadn't really expected them to even get lit.

When he lifted his head from hers, Richard whispered, "Hello, my dear."

She didn't know why she was blushing at that, but she was. "Hello, Richard." He apparently hadn't shaved for the past week, and he had some crazy, sexy stubble going on that she couldn't resist running her finger over.

"You like?" he growled.

"I don't usually like beards, but on you, yes, I do."

He gave another growl, kissed her like he meant business, then, keeping an arm around her waist as if he couldn't bear to lose contact with her, he turned to survey all of the bags and boxes on the counter.

"What have we here? It looks like you bought out every store that carries something I like."

"Well, I knew you were exhausted from all of the hours you put in over the past few days, and I thought that you probably wouldn't want to cook for yourself. I'm not the world's best cook, and I don't know you well enough yet to know what you like. So, a couple of little birds told me what your favorite restaurant is, and what your favorite dishes are there, plus what your favorite dessert was from another place, along with answering a few other questions I had about your preferences."

"I think I know who the little birds were."

She just smiled and went to the first bag, from a Chinese

food place in town, doing a reasonable imitation of Vanna White. "In here, we have pork fried rice, egg rolls, Moo Shu beef, and boneless pork ribs from The Noodle Emporium. Now that would probably tide me over for a week or so, but I'm hoping you won't have to make anything for yourself for at least a day or so."

He mock frowned. "Are you trying to intimate that I eat a lot?"

"Can't put anything past you—that's probably why you're a cop," she teased while he continued to frown. "Then we have your favorite cigars from The Smoke Shop downtown—not the one by the mall—as well as a fifth of Hennessy V.S. from the liquor store, a box of Snickers fudge from the Sweet Shop, two bottles of Cape Cod Cranberry soda—blech, by the way—a bag of Dutch Crunch salt and vinegar chips from Stop and Save, and last—but not least—a chocolate cream pie from Classy's."

"And does any of this come with a free vial of insulin?" he joked.

She gave him a rueful smile. "Some of it definitely should. I don't think there's a green vegetable among them—well, maybe in the Moo Shu, but then it's also slathered in soy sauce. I wasn't trying to buy healthy, I was just trying to get you comfort food."

Richard took both of her hands in his. "This is just a tremendously thoughtful and generous gift, Merice. Thank you." He used his hold on her hands to pull her tight against him and give her a big hug, during which he rocked them both back and forth a bit while rubbing a hand possessively up and down her back.

"Oh, and if you're still up for it, we're on for tomorrow, too."

"Oh, I am absolutely up for it—and for you," he purred, nuzzling her ear.

But Merice pushed herself away, and he reluctantly let her go, retaining a gentle hold on one of her hands. "Sorry, I didn't come here for that." She ignored what was definitely not a mock frown from him. "I just wanted to drop off some provisions. If I'd thought about it, I would've had it done for you last night."

"There's no way you could have known when we'd be coming back in, though. This is perfect." Then he reeled her in again, sending her crashing into his hardness and holding her captive there. "So, you're going to stay and help me make a dent in all of this food, right?" he nodded, as if trying to use the power of suggestion on her to make her give him the answer he wanted to hear.

"No, I hadn't planned on that."

His only answer was to look at her with a raised eyebrow.

She squirmed within his hold and beneath his intent gaze. "I didn't come over here to invade your privacy or impose on you in any way."

"That is a given, honey. I know that you, of all people, would sacrifice your own life before you ever did either of those things."

Merice grimaced. "I really hate it that you understand me so well already."

He laughed. "I'm glad you think I do." His next words were no nonsense. "And you're to tell me about anything I inevitably get wrong. Yes?" he asked, wanting her to agree with him.

"Oh, all right," she agreed ungraciously.

"Besides, I'm your boyfriend, and beyond that, your Dom. You could never invade my privacy or impose on me." Richard carefully said out loud what he expected her to do, "So, you're going to have dinner with me, and stay the night, and then we'll go on our date tomorrow from here."

Her, "Yeah, okay," sounded as if she was agreeing with her doctor that she needed to have a colonoscopy.

"Such enthusiasm!" he teased. "I have a feeling that around you, it's going to be a good thing I have a healthy ego."

She looked appalled at him having said that. "I'm not trying to insult you. I'm thinking about the practicalities of my cat being alone for that long."

"Oh."

Merice gave him a sheepish look. "And, yes, I was worried about the disruption of my schedule, but that was after the cat."

"I will do everything I can to be respectful of your schedule, because I know it's a touchstone of safety for you. But there will be disruptions and interruptions and changes on the fly. I hope you'll feel that being with me will be enough to compensate for those things."

Her eyes found his, and she soothed his bruised ego by stating unequivocally, "I think it already is, or I wouldn't be here."

"Good. And I'd be perfectly happy to have the cat come and stay here if that would help ease your mind."

She scrunched up her face several times as she thought. "Hmm. He's a friendly, relatively laid back cat, so he'd probably do fine—although he hates the cat carrier, not that I blame him."

"Well, we'll go this weekend and get him the same things he has at your place and leave them here, and you should leave some worn clothes here, too, for him to have a familiar scent about the place. Then, when you stay with me, which I hope will be very frequently, he'll be just as at home here as your place."

"It'll probably take just about as long for me to feel that way as it will him—three to six months or so."

He'd never heard that kind of timeframe in conjunction

with a cat settling in, much less a human, but he didn't question her. He'd never had a cat. Anita had loved them, but had been terribly allergic, so he had had to say no. It was one of the few times in all of their years together he'd had to deny her something that he knew she really wanted.

Suddenly, she found herself sitting on the counter. "What... what are you doing?" She began to try to squirm down immediately, but his hands were already slipping under her Henley to move her bra out of the way, and he was standing directly in front of her, between her legs, and there was literally no place for her to go.

"Richard! We can't do this here!"

"*Au contraire, ma petite,*" he grinned, "we most certainly can."

"But it's the kitchen counter!"

He interspersed his response with deliciously quick kisses and slower, gentler ones. "And I have a big bottle of bleach spray that I'll use on it afterwards. If this is anything like the last time—and I certainly hope that it is, maybe even better—you will definitely drip onto it. But I'm okay with that, because bleach."

She'd never made love in a kitchen. The idea was more than a little squicky to her, but he had an annoying habit of being able to make her forget her phobias and weirdness in favor of letting him touch her in a way that was more adept, more understanding of what she needed, than any other man with whom she'd had sex.

The counter—*island*, really—was right at the perfect height for him. The first thing he did was strip her down, quickly and efficiently, but without ignoring her concerns, either. When she began to seem stiff and look shy, he stopped what he was doing and kissed her deeply, taking his time with her and whispering reassuring things to her, some of which she couldn't really even take in, but they sounded soothing, regardless.

"You're safe with me, honey. And you're downright beautiful. At some point in the not too distant future, we're going to stay here—or your place, if that would make you more comfortable—for an entire long weekend, and I'm going to keep you naked the whole time."

She looked a bit alarmed at that proclamation, and it distracted her nicely from what he was doing. She was nude before she knew it, and seconds later, he had coaxed her to lie back as he did the bare minimum to his own clothing to allow himself to possess her fully, in one tremendous thrust. He practically came right then and there at her tiny whimper and the way she clung to him as if he was the only solid thing in her world as he spun it relentlessly out of control for her.

Those frighteningly talented fingers of his refused to stop strumming themselves over that most sensitive spot between them. And when he reached down and lifted her legs so that they were practically on his shoulders—watching carefully so that he didn't hurt her as he did that, not wanting to assume she was limber enough to do it without pain—he left her obscenely open to him, again, utterly unable to defend herself against him should she need to.

That resulted in her experiencing a certain edge of fear, but it was just that—the perfect tinge of it around the edges of her awareness. She wasn't truly frightened of him, even when he drove her past the arbitrary boundaries she'd set for herself—and him—and relentlessly brought her to an ecstasy that she wasn't sure she was ready for. But her body fully embraced it for him, as if it preferred that he be in control of it—and her—rather than boring, inhibited her.

There was no end to it, either. He slowed his own rhythm in order to concentrate more fully on her, watching every response she gave him—willingly or unwillingly—and filing the information away for future reference. Mind blowing, raw, savage orgasm followed savage orgasm, until she was

screaming through the last two. Even more loudly as he resumed his frantic pace while he continued to fuck her vulnerable body, catching a nipple between sharp teeth and razing it a bit, not stopping or allowing himself release until she came for him again. Then he took his pleasure of her slowly, in what must've sounded anticlimactic in comparison to her, but was truly one of the most powerful orgasms he'd ever experienced.

Chapter 5

For a long time, they lay there, his top half draped over hers, both of them bellowing air out of their lungs, then dragging it back in for the longest time.

When Richard felt he was able to, he disengaged himself from her and readjusted his clothes, then went into the laundry room to find a soft cloth, which he wet with warm water, bringing it back to clean them both up.

She glommed onto him as if he'd left her for months, not less than a minute, and he began to speak to her again in a reassuring voice that seemed to calm her, washing her with a gentle and obvious care that very nearly brought her to tears.

Then he helped her off the island and onto her feet, keeping an arm around her waist until he was certain that she could stand on her own, and dressing her as if she were a child, although not completely. He wasn't going to leave her naked—not now—but he only pulled her shirt back over her head and let her step into her panties. Her pants and bra, he folded and put in the laundry room.

She wanted to say something about that but decided not to. She didn't want him to think she was trying to top from the

bottom, or worse, was some kind of whiny, complaining sub, even though she felt even more exposed and raw than she usually did after sex and knew she would even if she was fully clothed. And that made her a bit clingy, even as she hated how she was behaving.

Richard, however, didn't seem fazed in the least when she refused to let him get more than a few inches away from her. He settled quickly into the idea that she wanted to be attached at his hip, and the arm that had been around her waist remained there as he did as he said he was going to do and thoroughly disinfected the counter where she had—as he'd predicted she would—left a considerable wet spot.

He didn't seem impatient or angry that he had a carbuncle clinging to him. He just worked around her, giving her a running soliloquy of what he was doing, as well as small things for her to do that wouldn't take her very far away from him while he prepared plates of Chinese food for the two of them.

Just from what he knew about her, he assumed that she was a picky eater, and when he had two empty plates in front of him and cartons and containers of food, he asked, with absolutely no judgment in his tone, "Is there any of this that you don't want to eat, babe?"

She nodded and whispered the first thing she'd said to him since they'd made love. "Thank you for asking. You can have the Moo Shu. I'd like some of the rest and some duck sauce, too, please."

It wasn't what he would have her eating regularly by any means, but this wasn't a usual day and he was willing to make a few exceptions. Overall, he would see that she ate much more healthily than this, but it was a mental health day for him, so why not for her, too?

"As milady commands," he smiled.

As the food nuked, he put the things that needed to be refrigerated away, poured himself a glass of Cape Cod soda

and her a glass of Diet Coke, and brought both of them, along with the Hennessy, glasses for it, and the cigars, into the den, where they could sit on the couch, in front of the TV, and eat junk food and watch the video equivalent of junk food shows for the night.

Or until he wanted her again, which wasn't likely to be that long, despite his advanced age. He felt like a horny teenager again around her, and he intended to indulge that impulse whenever he could.

She, of course, came with him back and forth. He again used his waiter training around her and brought both plates in on one arm, while holding onto her with the other.

Merice sat down as he put their plates on the coffee table in front of the couch. "Is there anything else we need or that I can get you that you can think of?"

She surveyed the veritable feast. "No, thank you."

She was so prim and proper now, but a veritable hellcat when he had her. What more could he ask for?

"I'd like to have a cigar after dinner," he said, sinking down on the couch next to her. "Will that bother you?"

"I don't think so, no, as long as it's not too smelly."

He was kind of surprised at that but wasn't going to push his luck.

Not surprisingly, they didn't agree on much in regards to TV shows, or maybe he just wasn't willing to put the time into finding more than one thing that they agreed on, but they settled on Apple TV Plus's *Tiny World*, which they both enjoyed enormously as they chowed down on their Chinese food.

She remained close to him for the rest of the evening, even continuing to get up when he did. She wasn't always glued to him as tightly as she had been before, but she was never very far away. When she had to get up to use the bathroom and she told him she was going to, she just stood there, not saying

anything. And he—idiot that he was—didn't notice for the longest time, until she was practically dancing in place with the need to go.

Finally, he looked up at her. "Oh, I'm sorry. You wanted me to go with you." He got up immediately and came to the bathroom with her. "Do you want me to come in with you?" he asked solicitously.

"If it would squick you, you can stay out."

"Absolutely not. If you want me to be there, then I want to be there with you."

He was surprised that it didn't squick her. It was the first time that anyone had ever asked him to do this when they didn't want him to hold their hair back as they were sick. And he wasn't at all sure what he should be doing while someone else was using the commode for its intended purpose, so he simply leaned back against the counter in front of the sink, crossing his arms over his chest and just waited.

Hearing her tinkle made him need to, too, so as soon as she was off the pot, he used it himself, and she stayed near, but not too close to him. Then they both headed back to the couch for another episode of what was rapidly becoming their favorite program.

Long about ten o'clock or so, she disappeared, which he noted, and returned, having put on both her pants and her bra.

When she sat down, he reached out and put his hand beneath her hair, at the back of her neck. "Cold?"

"A little."

"And the bra?"

She shrugged, paying much more attention to the show than to him. "I just feel more comfortable wearing it than not."

Richard leaned over and used the remote to turn the TV off.

"Hey! I was watching that!" she complained indignantly.

It was the first time he'd seen the slightest hint of annoyance from her.

"I'm well aware of that, Merice, but there's something that needs to be addressed, before it becomes a bad habit."

With that, she found herself guided over his lap. "But what... what have I done?"

"I'll tell you in just a minute."

He got her out of her jeans quite expertly, then reached up her shirt and unhooked her bra. "Take it off, please, and hand it to me."

She did exactly as she was told.

"Good. Now, when we finished making love a little while ago, and I redressed you, what did I have you wear?"

"My Henley and panties."

He inferred from context what a Henley was, since he'd never heard anyone refer to a shirt that way. "Exactly. Did I put you back into your pants?"

"No."

"Or your bra?"

"No."

"Where did I put them?"

"The laundry room."

"And yet, minutes ago, you took it upon yourself to put yourself back into both of them, didn't you?"

She ground her teeth together unhappily for a second, then answered, "Yes."

And as soon as the word was out of her mouth, his hand came crashing down onto her backside, eliciting a hearty yelp from her.

"And why do you think you're being spanked at the moment?"

"B-because," she said on a gasp at the sharp crack of his palm on her cheek, "I should have told that you I was cold,

and asked you if I could put them on?" Gasping became the order of the day, as each individual swat was more than enough to take her breath away.

"Correct. If you had told me that you were cold, I would have turned up the thermostat, not told you to put your pants on. And cold doesn't apply to your bra. So what do you think my answer would have been?"

"No."

"Also correct. If I've arranged you in some way, and you want to change that, you are always—unless it's an emergency situation, of course—to ask permission to do so."

"Yes, Richard."

"Sir," he corrected.

She turned and looked up at him, and his expression was carefully neutral as he gazed back down at her.

"Yes, Sir."

"Good."

It was the worst spanking she'd had from him yet, to the point that she very nearly used her safe word, which she was loath to do, especially so early on in their relationship. She knew that there was no timeframe for its usage, but she didn't want him to think of her as a wimp, either.

She flinched with each swat, kicking her legs up, trying to block or move his hand away from its intended target, and she did it often enough and was successful enough at it that he moved her enough off his lap that he could trap her legs with one of his own.

Not only did she end up crying, again, during the spanking, but she actually began to beg him to stop, too, which was something else that she'd sworn she would never do. It was terribly humiliating, but she would have done just about anything to get him to stop.

Unfortunately, it didn't have that effect. Richard didn't

stop until he thought he should—nothing she said or did had any influence on him in the least.

And the only way that she knew it was over was when he moved her—as if he was rearranging a Barbie doll—so that she was over him, legs spread around his waist, poised, naked and vulnerable, over his enormous cock.

As he deliberately grabbed hold of an extremely sore cheek in each hand, she cringed away from him, impaling herself on him, partially, in her haste to avoid his painful grip. And as soon as she'd done that, his hands moved to her hips, keeping her in place whether she wanted to be or not.

She didn't think she'd ever become accustomed to the sheer size of him. His eyes watched hers avidly as he forced her down onto him, stretching her open just shy of being in pain from it. And, to her horror, she realized that she liked that feeling very much, especially the fact that she was helpless to change the position he was putting her in and keeping her in. She was such a control freak that it amazed her that it turned her on so much.

This time, he gathered her hands in one of his, behind her back, leaving her even less able to fend him off—not that she wanted to, but still. Then he tugged on them just a bit, forcing her to arch her back and open herself to him even farther.

With the tips of the fingers of his free hand delving between her legs, but then only barely brushing themselves against her swollen button, Richard indulged himself more fully with her than he had previously. He loved the way her breasts bounced every time he thrust into her, the tips tight and looking as if they were aching to be suckled, as he deliberately teased her with her own desire, while keeping her almost perpetually full of him.

Eventually, after long moments of such torture, she couldn't help but debase herself enough to beg. "Ah, Richard!" she moaned.

"Yes, *ma petite*?" he barely ground out.

"Please, let me come!"

That seemed to be some sort of catalyst for him. She didn't know if it was that she was begging at all, or her begging to be allowed to climax, or what, but he began to fuck her even harder and faster than before, holding her wrists tightly and using his arm around her waist to stop her from being able to move at all as he slammed himself into her.

With his fingers withdrawn, he had left her terribly frustrated, and when she saw him throw his head back and bellow his climax, she was pessimistic about obtaining any relief from the way her lower body was throbbing heavily in time with her pulse as he spent himself inside her.

She expected him to deposit her on the couch right afterwards, but he surprised her. Instead, Richard let go of her wrists and leaned forward to take each nipple in his mouth and suckle on their in turn. Merice groaned aloud as he did that, losing all sense of decorum or embarrassment in favor of garnering every bit of pleasure she could from his efforts.

"I don't usually come before my lady does," he breathed, pressing two digits between her legs again and rubbing them slowly over her clit. Merice jumped at the contact that was almost as painful as it was pleasurable, because she was so tantalizingly close. "But you make me lose my head, honey."

His fingers became more diligent, but she didn't think she could stand the stimulation any longer.

A small hand found its way to his chest. "I—no—I can't."

"Oh, I'd be willing to bet that you can, and I say that you will."

Mindful of how sensitive she must be, he lightened his touch to the point that it was barely there, watching every move she made and absorbing the nuances therein, intent on

learning how best to touch her in as much detail as he did himself. And he had a great start on it.

He carefully kept her helpless against his intent as he built the inferno within her once again, feeling extreme pride at every moan, every sigh, every drop of slickness he gathered from her.

"Come for me, baby," he whispered fiercely, eyes locked with hers, holding her face with one hand so that she could not look away from him.

And, as if she was that perfectly trained already, she began convulsing immediately, screaming helplessly as he brought her to peak after violent peak.

When he had decided that she'd had enough, and not one minute before then, Richard stood with her in his arms and brought her to his bedroom, dressing her in one of his t-shirts—which she swam in adorably—and her panties, making a mental note of their size and style and that he needed to get some of them to keep there.

Then he tucked her into bed and spooned her from behind. He wasn't really sleepy yet, but he intended to stay with her until she fell asleep, which he had a feeling wasn't far off, and he was right. Almost as soon as she curled into a self-contained little ball, facing away from him, she began to snore softly. He waited another fifteen minutes or so, just to make sure that she didn't awaken and become frightened without him.

When he headed back to the den, he left the bedroom door wide open, but the hall light off. There would be enough light coming from the den to clue her in to where he was, he hoped. He didn't want more than that because it might keep her awake.

He wasn't going to stay up too much later himself. He was still recovering from everything they'd had to do over the past few days.

Damn, he was getting old. Earlier on in his career, he would have been all gung ho about what the department was doing. He would've been volunteering for everything he could and pulling extra shifts. But now, all he wanted to do was stay home with Merice.

The next morning, the woman who worried that she might be sick if she slept until six-thirty slept until seven-thirty before waking up in an absolute panic.

"Richard, we've got to get up. We have to be there at nine-thirty, and it's at least an hour's drive."

"We still have plenty of time," he insisted, rolling over to face away from her.

There was no way she was going to go back to sleep. She'd been rendered constitutionally incapable of it through years of having to be up very early in the morning.

So she got up and nursed a cup of coffee, all while looking at her watch every five minutes, or less, and growing more and more wound up.

Richard strolled into the den at eight o'clock, saying, "Well? Are you ready?"

She couldn't resist taking a swing at him on the way by, connecting quite solidly with his shoulder.

"Hey, what was that for?" he asked, trailing her out to his car while carrying the cooler she'd packed and tried to heft out there herself. He'd relieved her of it, of course, as soon as he'd seen her trying to wrestle it out the door.

"You're going to make us late."

Another bit of anger that intrigued him, but then, he should have guessed. She was tightly wound, and those types of people tended to like to get everywhere early. He was rarely—unless there were unforeseen circumstances—late, but neither was he early. Richard shot for trying to be either about five minutes early, or right on time, and he almost always came in somewhere between those two.

When they were in the car, he turned to her and said, "I want you to take a deep breath."

She glared at him outright but did as she was told as he took her hand.

"This is a fun, relaxing day. I know it's easier said than done, but let's try not to get all wrapped around the axle about things. I'll get us there in plenty of time, I promise, but even if I don't, I'm sure there are all sorts of wonderful things we can do wherever we're going to end up."

Her grunt of bare acknowledgement was hardly encouraging.

Then he looked at her expectantly. "Where are we going? I need to know where to drive to."

"Rye, New Hampshire."

"Oh. Hmm. I wonder what we could be doing there?"

He turned on the stereo and brought up a playlist of songs from the sixties, seventies, and eighties that he thought she might like. It wasn't all that different from the one that had been playing at Jake and Jenny's party. And he was right.

As much as Merice worried about them getting there on time, it was hard to remain tense and anxious while singing *Renegade* with Styx, even though he insisted that they each have something to eat from the nearest drive through fast food place that did breakfast.

Almost to her disgust, they rolled into a parking spot at the dock fifteen minutes before they were supposed to leave. She would have preferred that they be there when the company suggested they be there, which was fifteen minutes ago, but it was early enough in the season that there wasn't much of a line.

He got the cooler out. "A whale watch! What a great idea!"

"Grab your sunglasses; you're going to need them." Hers were already atop her head. "Have you been on one before?"

"I haven't."

"I've been on four, two out of Bar Harbor, one of which included seeing puffins, and a couple out of Portsmouth. I've seen humpbacks and minkes and seals and porpoises—porpi?"

He laughed at her correction of herself. "I don't know which one of those is right, but that must've been amazing."

It turned out to be one of the best trips she'd ever been on. They got to see a ton of all sorts of different whales and had a momma humpback and her baby playing with the boat as if it was a kid's toy in a bath tub. They even saw a right whale, which was among the most endangered whales on the planet.

Although they could have bought food for themselves on the ship, Merice had taken it upon herself to pack them a lunch, which was what was in the cooler, along with bringing—in a reusable grocery bag—other accoutrements, including hats, sun screen, and binoculars.

"Wow, you did a great job planning for this trip. Thank you! It's a great first date," he complimented. She seemed to have relaxed a lot while they were on the boat and appeared to be quite at home on the water. He asked her if she'd spent a lot of time on boats, and she said only the whale watches and the occasional ferry, which surprised him, because she'd spent a lot of her time practically hanging over the edge of the boat, with her nose into the wind, with a truly blissful expression on her face the entire time.

The trip home was spent in long stretches of what he found to be a comfortable, companionable silence. He glanced at Merice occasionally and didn't see any signs that the quiet was making her tense.

All in all, he couldn't believe his luck in finding her. He wished he'd taken his friends up on the offer to introduce them much earlier, which they'd wanted to do for him forever. But Richard knew he really wasn't ready for a relationship until

recently. He'd loved Anita so much that it was very hard for him to let her go, even though she was already gone.

But he'd genuinely enjoyed every bit of the time they'd spent together, so far. He was surprised to feel as committed to Merice as he already did, but they seemed to be very compatible, and he liked her a lot, probably more than he should so early on. He never wanted to be in anyone's pocket, nor did he want anyone to expect that of him. Merice was quite independent—in fact, he felt kind of guilty that he was happy that she had the phobia he'd discovered. Independence was wonderful, but too independent and he'd have to question why she even wanted to be with him. She leaned a little bit towards that naturally, having spent her life with only occasional, relatively short lived relationships.

But her quiriness attracted him, and he looked forward to trying to help her overcome—or at least to not worry about looking to him to help her with—her triggers and get her to relax more, hopefully.

It might have been old-fashioned, but he had felt protective of Anita—he would have stood in front of a bus to save her—and he was already well on the way to feeling the same way about Merice.

He realized that she was much more reserved than he was, so he knew he had to be careful about not being too pushy. Not only did he not want to make her feel obligated or guilty by confessing his feelings for her too soon, he also didn't want to go overboard and make her feel that he was being controlling or overbearing.

He very much didn't want to risk pushing her away.

Chapter 6

They ended up spending the weekend together, and after they'd outfitted his place, they went over and got Teddy, her cat. He seemed to settle into Richard's house with few issues and quickly became even more attached to Richard than his mistress was. Every time Richard sat down, the cat piled into his lap and demanded pats and/or scritch-scratches. He was in Heaven when Richard paid any amount of attention to him.

"I think I've been replaced," Merice had joked. The cat hadn't once come near her since they'd brought him there.

"Sorry."

"Not sorry," she supplied.

"Well, I can't help it if I have animal magnetism," he replied with a lofty air.

Merice snorted. "I figured you just rolled in catnip."

Their lives kind of fell easily together, as they did themselves, which he considered to be yet another sign that they were going to be compatible in the long term. From that point on, they were rarely out of each other's company, even during the week. They were together twenty-four seven on the week-

ends, except for those times when his work required that he be away. But he continued his tradition of calling to check up on her at seven or so each evening.

"So, my dear, how are you doing?" Richard wanted to call her "my love" but didn't want to jump the gun. It had only been a few months, and although he would have been very comfortable telling her that he loved her just a few days into their relationship, he was well aware that she might have turned tail and run upon hearing that, so he'd managed to resist that urge, so far.

It was a night months later, when he had to be away but was able to call her for much of it. Nights like this were becoming more and more frequent as the situation—whatever it was—became more and more complicated and involved.

Merice laughed. "Please stop pretending that you care about how I am." He was about to protest that, of course, he cared about her, but then she continued wryly, "I know you only call me to make sure that Teddy is all right." And she was only half teasing. If she were a lesser woman, she might well have thought that he was with her just because of how much her cat loved him, and he loved him.

Richard chuckled. "I never thought that you'd be jealous of a cat."

"Well..."

"No, really, how are you, darling?" he purred, and she immediately became wet just from the sound of his voice. "Is work still aggravating you?"

"It wouldn't be aggravating if I could just get other people to do their damned jobs!"

"Not everyone has your work ethic, I'm afraid."

"Tell me about it. I can't get Nicole to do anything, and Luis is constantly calling in, which means that I end up doing his work."

"Deep breath, baby," he reminded her.

She did as she was told, and he could hear that she did.

"Good girl. I'm proud of you for everything you do there, but I don't want you getting all worked up about it. That is not your real life. Your real life is with me."

That was a very new concept he'd introduced to her. Like her parents, Merice's center of attention—all her life—had been her job and advancing in it. She'd pretty much gone as far as she could unless she wanted to go back to school, which she didn't. But barring that, she intended to maintain the standards she'd learned from those who had trained her. However, she was finding that very few of those coming up around her, or under her, in the company were as interested in conscientiously dedicating themselves to the business.

And Richard was trying to help her get to the point where she not only could just let that kind of attitude roll off her back, but also to believe in her heart that it was even okay for her to feel that way, too. That her life didn't have to begin and end at work. "When you die, no one from work is going to be there at your bedside, holding your hand. You're not going to regret that you didn't spend enough time at work."

She pointed out that that was rich, coming from a man who was spending so much time at his job.

He wasn't angry that she'd said that. "Yes, but my job involves public safety. Yours involves lining the pockets of a corporation with money, along with your blood, sweat, and tears."

Merice didn't like being wrong, but even knowing that, he didn't hesitate to point it out to her when she was.

One of the ways he tried to get her to relax more about her job was that she had always hoarded her vacation and personal days for "someday". And, although he wasn't advocating that she become a goldbricker—which she was constitutionally incapable of doing anyway—he did convince her to play hooky every once in a while, for the first times in her life

calling out when she was neither sick nor injured. She'd then spend the day with him, rarely venturing out of bed.

She hadn't seemed too overly anxious about it, but then, he'd brought her off so many times and so thoroughly each time, that she was barely able to think straight, even the next day, when she went back to work and confronted the messes that had been created in her absence. But the uninterrupted time with him—that she also considered to be rife with naughtiness since she really should have been at work—was more than worth it, she'd decided. No contest.

"How are you?" she asked, knowing he was going to give her a pat reply.

"I'm fine, thanks."

"How's work going for you?"

"Same old, same old." An even more pat answer, but she understood why he didn't go beyond that—ever.

"I wish there weren't such a likelihood of us getting interrupted," he drawled lazily, getting up to close his door preventatively, then returning to lean back in his chair. "I'd make you bring yourself off while I listened."

He'd been threatening to introduce her to phone sex. Her occasional prudishness surprised him every time when it reared its ugly head. But, as non-vanilla as she tended to be about some things sexual, she could be just as uptight about others, and phone sex was one of those things, apparently.

"Richard!" She sounded absolutely aghast at that suggestion, and she knew that he knew she was blushing, too. He seemed to delight in making her do that, among other things.

He was unapologetic, murmuring low and deep, "I keep telling you, baby. There's going to come a day when I'm going to want you to do that for me. And you know better than to say no to me, don't you, Merice?"

This time, her "Richard!" was much softer and breathier,

but even more affronted if that was possible. "You shouldn't talk like that at work," she scolded.

"I'm alone. I closed my door, and everyone else very conveniently went to get something to eat. But I wanted to talk to you when there isn't the chance that someone with big ears will barge in and spoil your debut."

She tsked at him. "You should have gotten something to eat."

"I'd rather have you to eat."

Her cheeks burned almost painfully. "Stop that!"

"That would be no fun at all." He chuckled. Then he switched gears, knowing he had her a bit off kilter from the sex talk. "Have you put any more thought into what I asked you to think about, baby girl?"

One of the most wonderful things he'd done in the course of their still young relationship was occasionally do what he called a "check-in" with her about how she felt things were going, particularly in regards to the D/s end of things, but he made sure that she knew he was eager to talk about any concerns she might have at all. He seemed worried about the endearments he used, but she wasn't a spring chicken, and she told him outright that she liked all of them.

"Even things like 'baby' or 'baby girl'? I know those are falling out of favor nowadays."

"Not with me," she stated outright.

"Good."

The last time he'd done that, though, he'd brought up a subject that had given her pause. He'd suggested that they move in together.

"Isn't it too soon?" she'd asked as she lay snuggled against his side, naked as the day she was born and becoming surprisingly okay with being that way, since he often required that she be.

"There's no schedule involved in this, hon. We can do

whatever we want, whenever we want. The only thing it's dependent on is how we both feel."

"And you want us to move in together?"

"Yes, ideally to my place, just because it's bigger and it's a newer house, and so it's in better condition."

She hated it when he was right.

She had gone silent, and he knew that she wanted to say "no" but didn't want to say "no."

"I'm not saying we have to do it tomorrow, either, although I would be fine with that. I understand that it's going to take you a bit more time to come to grips with the idea. I'm just putting the bug in your ear, because it's something I definitely want us to do and I want you to be thinking about."

He could literally hear her heave a sigh of relief.

But tonight, when he brought it up—months after he'd done it originally without mentioning it again until now—he got more of the same silence.

"Talk to me, Merice. Tell me what you're feeling besides scared of something new."

She'd never met a man who was more concerned with her feelings than he was. She hadn't been brought up to dwell on them much, so it was a new experience for her, but he seemed very genuinely interested to hear what hers were.

Merice was frowning—still, yet—at how well he knew her.

He heard her sigh. "I'm feeling scared, yeah. Concerned. Worried. Tense. Anxious. Stressed. In other words, the usual."

He could have guessed all that, but he guessed it was good that she hadn't mentioned anything he hadn't already anticipated. "About what, specifically?"

"What if I move in there and we live together and discover that we hate each other?"

"Unlikely, considering how much time we've already spent together, but go on."

"Plus, I own my house. What am I going to do with it if I'm living at your place?"

"Nothing, immediately," he supplied. "Winterize it, batten down the hatches, and leave it unoccupied for a while, while you decide what you want to do with it. Or rent it out, if you want. I'm pretty handy, so I could do any small repairs it needed, or you could get a property management company to help you with that. Or you could sell it."

She didn't seem very enthusiastic about any of the solutions he suggested.

Richard took a deep breath. "I've not pushed you about this, Merice, because I know changes like this aren't easy for you. But I'm going to get to the point where I'm not going to be asking anymore. I just want you to know. I want you with me—all the time."

"I want that, too," she whispered, and despite the reticence she was displaying, he absolutely believed her.

"Good, because you need someone watching out for you, and to make sure you behave."

Her heart flip-flopped violently at his tone of voice, particularly at the end of that sentence.

"Pretty soon, I'm going to expect you do something concrete about it. You don't have to worry about the actual move—my friends and I will accomplish that for the price of some beer and pizza. But you should come up with a plan about what you want to do with it afterwards, because once I have you with me, I'm not going to let you go."

He heard her sigh, but then she answered, "Yes, Sir."

He wished her words were a bit more enthusiastic, but he understood why they couldn't be.

"I wish I was there with you now, baby. I know you're very capable on your own and all that, but I'm still so sorry to be leaving you alone so much nowadays."

He sounded just as agonized about that as she did about most things.

"I'm fine, Richard, really. I'm used to being alone."

"Yes, but that doesn't make it right, especially when I'm supposed to be there, taking care of you and keeping you in line, not necessarily in that order."

Her shy, embarrassed laugh made him feel a little better.

"Well, the troops are back, so I'd better say goodbye, honey."

She heard someone knock on the door, then the sound of someone dropping something.

"We brought this back for you, Sheriff."

"Thanks, McCloughsky. Okay, baby, I'm going to let you go. I miss you, and I'll see you as soon as I can." He almost said he missed her and loved her, but stopped himself in time.

"I miss you, too, Richard. Be careful!"

"I will, I promise. Be good."

"I will! Bye!"

"Bye, baby girl."

Merice sat there with her phone in her hand for a long while, staring down at it, and then she did something she hadn't done before—she put a reminder into her reminder app for tomorrow: call Jenny, re: good property management places.

When he broached that subject the next time, it was a month or so later, and she was over his lap, barely beginning to recover from the punishment he doled out to her for getting out of bed when he'd told her to stay there. They were at his place, as usual, and she was on the tail end of recovering from a bad cold. It was Sunday, and she'd been off since Wednesday because she'd felt so miserable. She'd begun feeling much better yesterday, and he'd put her to bed early this evening so that she could catch up on the sleep she'd lost while she was so stuffed up that she could barely breathe,

knowing that she was planning on going back to work tomorrow.

If she hadn't been so much recovered, he would have put his foot down about that, but she really was nearly better now, so he let it go. Instead of just going back to bed, though, she'd wandered into the living room and curled up next to him.

Even though he'd squeezed her tight to his side as soon as she'd sat down, he still called her on her misdeed. "Honeybun, not that I don't want you with me always, but what are you doing here? You're supposed to be in bed," he chided softly, careful not to hurt her feelings. Since he'd been taking care of her, Richard had noticed that when she was sick, she was much less stubborn and independent than she usually was, and much needier, as well as sensitive, which he really didn't mind.

Disregarding her sniffs of indignation, he picked her up and brought her right back to the bedroom. Then, to her surprise, he joined her there.

The first thing he did was press his hand to her forehead. "No fever." She'd spiked one of a hundred and one point two on Thursday, but he'd been able to keep it down by giving her Tylenol religiously since then. "That's good."

He took both of her hands in his and looked into her eyes. "But what isn't good is you taking it into your own hands to decide when you should be in bed, honey, when that decision has already been made for you."

"Richard," she pouted, knowing where this was going. "No," she whispered.

"I'm afraid so, baby."

When it was over, but he hadn't allowed her up yet—while she was still vulnerable, with her pajama pants and panties around her ankles, and her still very warm cheeks beneath his hand—he took the opportunity to ask, "Since you're so much

better, my darling, have you been thinking about what you're supposed to be thinking about?"

Leave it to him to question her about that when she was already in such a vulnerable position—physically and emotionally. "Yes," she answered, wishing it sounded more confident, but it was hard to sound that way when one was still snuffling and sniffing from a punishment and not a cold.

"You have? And to what conclusion have you come, dare I ask?"

"Well, since Jenny's a real estate mogul, I called her a while ago to ask who she might recommend as a property management company."

He could barely believe what he was hearing from her. He hadn't expected her to acquiesce quite that easily, expecting her to figure that she could blow him off and ignore the question indefinitely.

"Oh? And who did she recommend?"

"Several companies, and I've spoken with them all. Their rates are pretty stiff—I'm not sure I'm going to be able to get enough out of renting to make it worthwhile, so I've also talked to Jenny about just out and out selling it."

Jenny, of course, had been both genuinely ecstatic for her and self-congratulatory about the fact that she and her husband had introduced them.

"She says I can get about twice what I paid for it if I sell it."

"That's pretty good."

"It is."

She didn't sound very eager to follow either suggestion, so as he moved her so that he could cradle her in his arms, he suggested quietly, "Perhaps you should just close it down. It's getting towards winter, and as I mentioned, you could put all of these decisions off until spring and decide then what you want to do." Then he kissed her gently. "That way, you could

spend the winter here with me, without losing a place to go back to, you know, if seeing my dirty socks on the floor or my empty bowl in the sink drives you bat shit crazy."

Merice laughed. "I really think it's much more likely that you're the one who would be happy if I had another place to go, considering how much of a fussybudget I am about everything."

"Oh, no. Never. I have a method of correcting any behaviors I don't like that isn't open to you."

She frowned fiercely up at him. "That's not fair."

"No, it isn't, is it?" he said, not sounding particularly sympathetic to her plight.

Merice tsked loudly at him, moving out of his embrace to cling to the edge of the bed in a huff. But she soon found herself pulled back into his arms.

"You can't get away from me that easily, my pretty." He did a reasonable Wicked Witch of the West.

"That's not what she said to Dorothy, you know."

"I was using poetic license."

"Then your poetic license should be revoked."

She was still naked, and he easily pressed her onto her back beneath him, finding his way between her legs, then inside her. He didn't think it would ever fail to amaze him, the sounds she made and the expressions that passed over her face when he entered her. It was as if she was a virgin every time, as if his size was utterly unexpected and somewhat hard for her to cope with, and he adored watching her struggle to cope at his presence within her.

He still had a hair trigger around her, but he was working on it, because he really did want to bring her off before he let himself enjoy her more thoroughly, because that enjoyment was very much enhanced by making her scream out her pleasure at his own behest.

Chapter 7

Several months later, they were ensconced in their bedroom, watching *The Mandalorian*, which she hadn't expected to like, since neither science fiction nor fantasy were her things, when he got a call.

"Billy, what's up?" he answered immediately.

Merice paused the show so he didn't miss anything, not meaning to eavesdrop, but unless she got up and went into another room, she couldn't help it, and she didn't want to bother him while he was on the phone to ask him if he wanted her to go, either. Besides, if he wanted to make the conversation private, he could get out of bed and go into any one of the other rooms in the house, anyway.

"Really? Now? That's way earlier than we thought. Yeah, I know, it should have happened long before this. Okay. I'll be right there."

He hung up and turned to her. "I'm sorry, baby, but I've got to go in."

"No problem." She backed out of Apple TV+ and into Netflix on their Roku. "I'll save this for when you'll be back. Any idea when that will be?"

She knew how he was going to answer that question before he said it. "When the job is done."

"Is there anything I can get for you or do for you before you go?" she asked, and he smiled down at her, loving her clear attempts to take care of him, even though, of the two of them, he was the least likely to need it. Still, he appreciated that she had the impulse.

"Thanks to your delicious dinner this evening, I think I'm good."

He could cook, but he didn't have a very large repertoire, so he had been actively encouraging her to. She'd been doing surprisingly well at it—especially since he had reassured her that, when there was the inevitable inedible blunder, they would just go out to eat, so where was the bad? Luckily, Jenny had been only too happy to kibitz with her, suggesting the latest appliances and pointing her towards beginner's recipes along the way.

Still, she got up and saw him off, kissing him goodbye at the door and cautioning him very sternly to be careful, which he found endearingly cute.

"I will, baby, I promise."

It was still a relatively new house for her, so she didn't sleep well when he was gone. She'd just managed to fall asleep when her phone rang.

Merice sat up and looked at it. It was him, and it was two-forty-five in the morning. She was filled with a sense of dread. This was not going to be good.

She punched the green "accept" button. "Richard?"

There wasn't any time for niceties. "Honey, I want you to listen to me very carefully, and do exactly as I say. It's very important that you obey me."

"Okay."

He knew he'd just amped up the anxiety that was always in the

background of her existence to a zillion, but he didn't have time to be gentle about it, and her being nervous in this situation might be an advantage. It might get her to realize that she couldn't fool around. "Listen to me. You have to get out of that house right now. Put Teddy in his carrier, grab his food and litter, and take him to Jenny's. I've already talked to Jake and he's expecting you. Teddy knows them and he'll be fine. Grab your own valise and throw some clothes and your meds into it and get out of there."

Her mind was racing, and there was no denying the urgency in his voice. "Should I just go to my house?"

"No. Hand off Teddy and go somewhere away from here—anywhere. Do you have a friend or aunt or uncle or cousin or something outside of New England?"

"Not on whom I could just drop in, no."

"Okay, well, then get in your car and drive towards wherever you think there might be someone who could shelter you for a little while. A couple of days or so, probably not longer than that. The more distance you can put between you and the house, the better."

"Jesus, Richard. What about my work?"

"I'll call them. Suzanne is your boss, right? I'll apprise them of what's going on. If I have to, I can get them some paperwork to document the need for you to be gone for a while. Maybe, once you get settled, you could telecommute or something. I don't know." He ran his hand over his face. "Merice, we're wasting time talking about this. You need to get out of there and go somewhere several states away from here. Oh, there's cash in the chicken on top of the fridge. Use cash as much as possible. Stop by an ATM and take out as much as it will allow you to."

"What about you?" She sounded forlorn and scared, and his heart ached for her.

"I'll be fine, I promise. Now do as I say. You won't be able

to get in touch with me for a while, but that's probably for the best. We shouldn't talk until I get in touch with you."

"How will you know where I am?"

"I'll know."

"Jesus Christ, what is going on?"

"I can't tell you the particulars yet. Just do as I say, Merice. I'm not joking. Get the hell out of there—*now!*"

The phone went dead, and she did exactly as he said, shucking out of her pajamas and into shorts and a t-shirt—not bothering with a bra—and getting Teddy's things together as well as her own. She put things by the door as she got them together—food, litter, the carrier full of angry cat, and then the valise into which she had thrown all sorts of things she wasn't even sure she'd need, but it was enough outfits for a couple days at least.

Then she hefted all of those things into her arms, trying to make it in one trip, although she couldn't. Teddy was going to have to wait for the next one. She had her keys out and was in the midst of cramming things into the surprisingly roomy trunk of her Toyota Camry when a car screeched to a halt at the end of the driveway. It was probably Richard, she thought, coming to make sure that she was doing as he told her to do.

But the next thing she knew, someone had put a black bag over her head, and as hard as she fought against it, her wrists and ankles were zip tied together, and then she was being picked up like an old rug and shoved into the trunk of a car that wasn't hers or Richard's. She thought weirdly, *as if this is something Richard would do to me.*

Before the trunk closed, someone pressed something over her mouth and nose, and she was out like a light.

"Sheriff?"

Richard glanced up at the man who had been his deputy the longest, Billy Turnbull. "What is it, Billy?"

"Someone's on the phone—a Mrs. Gardiner? She says that the white car in your driveway has its driver's side door and trunk open, and there's a box of litter and a bag of cat food spilled on the driveway. Oh, and she says that she can hear Teddy yowling in the house. Is there something you'd like her to do?"

Richard was already up and out the door on the way to the house, terrified that what he thought might happen—and why he'd been so adamant that she leave—had already happened.

"Please let her be at home. Please let her be at home. Please let her be at home," he chanted to himself all the way to his house.

He screeched to a stop at the curb in front of the house and saw exactly the sight that Mrs. Gardiner had described to Billy. She came out of her door and headed towards him as he jumped out of the car and ran to what he was horrified to realize was now a crime scene.

"I'm sorry to call you at work, Richard, but I was worried about your girlfriend. This is her car, right?"

"Yes, Mrs. Gardiner, and I thank you very much for your phone call. You might well have saved her life. But I need you to go back inside, because we need to preserve the crime scene, okay? I'll send a deputy to talk to you as soon as I can get one here." He'd already radioed for help, having that horrible feeling in the pit of his stomach that things were not going to be good when they got there.

Then he entered his own home with his gun drawn—something he'd never imagine doing in a million years—clearing each room methodically, wanting to call out for Merice, but knowing he shouldn't. Until he knew that there was no one else in the house, he didn't want to alert the poten-

tial criminal—or more likely, criminals—that he was there. It turned out that he was the only person in the house, though. Merice was gone.

Her purse was in the car and the cat was in the foyer, and he was pissed off like nobody's business. He knew that she would never have gone anywhere voluntarily without him. Richard took the cat out of the carrier and put his litter box and some food and water into the back bedroom with him, then closed the door. Teddy was a little happier not to be caged any longer, but still not happy not to have the run of the house.

Six or seven cop cars descended on the house all at once, sirens blaring and lights flashing. All of his neighbors, almost all of whom were on their way to work at this hour of the morning, stood and gawked until they couldn't afford to remain any longer.

He set a couple guys to crowd and traffic control and let the rest of them work the scene, telling his best deputy exactly what he'd done earlier in the morning. "I called her and told her to get out of the house. I knew there was a good chance that they were going to try to get to me, but I thought I could get her out of there in time."

Billy had never seen the sheriff look quite as murderous as he did at that moment. He could see how he was clenching and unclenching his enormous fists at his sides, as if he was just waiting for an excuse to deck someone—anyone. Even at a good moment, no one really ever wanted to cross Sheriff Hayes, even though he was, ultimately, a very fair guy. But now, anyone who put a foot wrong during this investigation in particular was going to regret ever having been born.

The Sheriff's Woman

The deputy took as much of the burden off the sheriff in regards to this case, which was an adjunct to the bigger one they'd all be working for months now. It seemed that the mobbed up guy they'd been after hadn't taken kindly to the advances they'd made in trying to make a case against him, and he'd decided to go after the sheriff himself—some philosophy along the lines of cutting off the head of the leader and watching the followers crumble. Only, it wasn't Richard they'd taken.

He was out of his mind with worry for her, and that wasn't even starting on the guilt he felt mounting within him with every second she was gone that this had happened to her because of him. He dedicated himself to working twenty-four seven for the next several days, trying to find any lead as to where she might be being held, and coming up with bupkis at every turn.

After he backed an FBI agent into a corner and punched a hole in the wall less than an inch from the poor man's head, Billy, who was pretty much the same size as the sheriff, but twenty years younger, manhandled him out to a squad car and drove him home.

When it had first happened, once CSI had finished with the scene, Billy had had it cleaned up and the car battery—which had been drained with the doors open all night—recharged. The house looked bizarrely normal when they pulled up, as if everything was perfectly fine.

Richard had to convince himself that Merice wasn't going to be waiting inside for him.

Billy accompanied him into the house, heated him up some of what looked like leftover meatloaf, and got him a beer.

"Eat. I don't think I've seen you consume anything in seventy-two hours."

"Because I'm not hungry, Deputy," he yelled back, trying to get up.

But Billy put himself in front of the older man at great personal peril. "Eat the damned food, sir," he added as an afterthought. "I remember when Kendall lost the baby. You were right there for us. You stayed with us and took care of us for almost a week afterwards, while we were walking, talking zombies. So I'm just saying what you said to us. Eat the fucking food."

Richard growled, but he knew he was right. He sank back down into the chair and took a couple of bites of Merice's meatloaf and had a few swigs of beer.

"We'll find her, sir. Everyone, even the FBI agents, are looking for her—the whole city, the whole county, the whole damned state."

He leaned back in his chair, feeling every one of his fifty-two years. "It's been more than three days, Deputy. You know what that means." The longer she was gone, the less likely they were to find her—alive, at least. Both of them knew it, but neither was going to say it.

When he'd eaten most of the meatloaf and drunk all of the beer, Billy said, "Why don't you try to get some sleep? I'll keep my ear to the ground, and if something comes in that looks promising, I'll get you up."

Richard stood. "You'd fucking well better or I'll drop you where you stand."

Billy swallowed hard, knowing the sheriff meant exactly what he said. "Yes, sir."

It wasn't that day, or that night, or even the next day. But Billy continued to make it his job to make certain that the sheriff took care of himself, ate at least one meal a day, and spent some time lying down. He didn't know if he actually got

any sleep—he didn't, if the way he looked was anything to go by—but at least he rested.

It wasn't until almost two days later, when they were at the station and he burst into the sheriff's office to find him dead asleep with his head on the desk.

"Sheriff! Wake up! We have a lead!"

Richard came awake like he used to when he was Billy's age, up and at 'em immediately. "Well, what the fuck are you waiting for, Deputy? Tell me!"

He explained as he and the sheriff practically ran to where the squad car was parked. Apparently, two officers had finally found the black, non-descript sedan that they had caught on several of his neighbor's security cameras parked in front of his residence. The actual kidnapping had been recorded, and it had very nearly sent the sheriff ballistic when they'd seen it. But, although their hopes had been raised, they were dashed again when they lost track of the car in town, since most smaller municipalities—and none of the rural areas in the state—could afford cameras, and despite the enormity of the manhunt they had put together, they hadn't seen hide nor hair of it since.

"It's in front of a garage, in an area between Middlesex and Putnamville, on a Christmas tree farm. The local constabulary—State Troopers, mostly—are wanting to know if you want them to wait until you get there before they storm the place."

He'd lived in Vermont all of his life, and he'd never heard of either of those places, not that that mattered in the least. He was already heading for his car. "How long a ride there?"

"Forty minutes or so?"

As much as he wanted his own face to be the first one she saw when—if, he reminded himself ruthlessly—she was rescued, and if she was rescued alive, Richard first and foremost wanted her to be rescued as soon as humanly possible.

So putting his own desires aside, he said, "No. Tell them to go ahead without me. If she's there, I want her found, with or without me."

He went to the driver's side. "Do you want me to drive, sir?" Billy offered.

"No, Deputy. You can ride along, but I have more experience driving on Vermont roads at high speeds than you do."

The person who made the roads in Vermont, in particular, but parts of most of New England, had never learned the fact that the shortest distance between two points was a straight line. Most roads in the Green Mountain State followed either the bases of mountains or rivers or deer paths, and thus, were curvy, hilly, mountainous, and treacherous—and that was in summer.

"Billy? Radio whoever you've been liasoning with and tell them that I want to know," his voice broke, but he continued talking anyway, "I want to know as soon as they've found her. If they do, and," he took a deep breath, "whether she's dead or alive."

"Yes, sir."

He heard Billy relay that information, as well as the somber, "Copy that" that came back.

They were about ten minutes out when Billy's walkie-talkie squawked loudly. "Deputy Turnbull?"

"Go ahead."

"We found the victim."

Billy looked at Richard for confirmation that he really wanted to hear this over the radio. Richard nodded curtly and gripped the steering wheel fit to break it in two.

"She's alive, but—"

"But what!" Richard screamed, and the guy must've heard him.

"She's in pretty bad shape."

"Son of a fucking bitch," Richard breathed, trying to press

the accelerator through the floor he already had it nearly pressed against, and shooting them forward.

Billy hadn't been too proud to hold on to the handle above his head throughout this trip, and he'd been silently praying, too, that they'd make it there in one piece, wanting to tell the sheriff that he wouldn't be any help to his lady friend if he was dead himself, but he wisely kept his thoughts to himself.

The car laid rubber and skidded on the dirt when it stopped, as gaggles of cops stood outside the entrance to a very old, obviously long disused garage on the McKenzie Family Christmas Tree Lot, which looked like it had been abandoned for years, too.

A man who looked considerably older than Richard, who was dressed in full regalia of the local sheriff's department, stepped in front of Richard as soon as he flung himself out of the car at a dead run.

"Slow down, son. We've got ourselves a little situation here."

"Explain," Richard demanded as he skirted around the man and headed into the garage.

The other guy huffed and puffed, trying to keep up with his dead run. "Well, we found her. She's in a crawl space beneath this place. It's pretty tight quarters in there, just so's you know. The wooden floor is very spongy and the whole floor is likely to give way if we dislodge too many boards." Then he continued, saying things Richard very much wished he had never heard. "She was blindfolded, gagged, and her wrists and ankles were bound. She's alive, but she's kinda like catatonic or whatever. Won't respond to any of us. Hasn't made a peep since we found her, hasn't even had any of the water we've been trying to give her. She's bruised, black eyes and such, but we can't see if she's hurt in any other way because we can't seem to coax her out. And, seeing that she's, well, yours, no one wants to lay hands on her.

"Damned fucking straight," he agreed. "Show me where."

It was even worse than he'd imagined when he got there. There was no proper entrance to the hole where they'd shoved her, apparently. They'd just pried up some ancient boards, then nailed them back into place, obviously expecting to just leave her there to die.

Richard stretched out on the floor and consciously wiped the grimace he'd been wearing ever since this had happened off his face. He could see where the boards had been taken up, and how she was kind of wedged in there, with absolutely no room to move.

When he spoke, it was in the softest, most reassuring tone he could muster. "Merice, honey, it's me—Richard. I'm right here with you, baby. Are you hurt anywhere else, my love?" He was very aware of what he'd just said and didn't give much of a damn that he'd said it, since it was the God's honest truth. "Can you help me get you out of here? We've got an ambulance waiting to take you to the hospital, where we'll get you all fixed up, lickety-split, I promise."

His teeth ground together fit to break them as he could see that her eyes were black down to her chin, and they were so fixed—staring straight ahead—that she looked dead, except that she blinked occasionally, very slowly. She gave no sign that she'd heard him whatsoever.

He continued to talk to her, to cajole and coax, but nothing seemed to get through to her.

Then he decided to switch tacks, changing his tone completely to one that didn't ask, but demanded—firmly, but gently. It was a tone he hoped she would recognize and respond to instinctively.

"Look at me, Merice. I want you to latch onto the sound of my voice and come back to me. We need to get you out of here, and I expect you to help us with that."

He could hear the murmurs of some of the men who had

gathered around them—eager to help—about how he was speaking to her, but since he didn't give a flying fuck about what they thought, he ignored them.

He kept his voice soft and calm, but also demanding and expectant, stopping just short of reminding her to obey him when finally, her eyes closed tightly and he saw a single tear trail down her dirty, bruised face.

"That's it, honey." He softened his tone only a little. "Open your eyes and look at me, Merice. Do as I say, now," he scolded a bit. Slowly, agonizingly slowly, she did as she was told, the stormy gray eyes that met his swimming with tears. Even his "good girl" was relatively stern. "Now, I'll do everything I can to help you." He looked up at all of the men around him. "We all will. I know you must be terribly tired and hurting, but I want you to do the best you can to work your way out of there. You got in, so you have to be able to get out."

It was hard going; they were trying to keep the floor intact lest it collapse beneath them, which meant that they wanted to remove as few boards as possible. Everyone was lying down in the dirt, so that their weight was more evenly distributed.

She screamed every time he touched her, even though he wasn't doing so in any way that should have hurt her. So, although it was going to kill him, Richard stopped trying to help her, even when he could clearly see that her attempts to do what he'd asked were causing her great pain. He'd rarely felt this utterly helpless in his life.

Eventually, though, she was able to sidle and wiggle herself out of there. He had to clench his fists to keep himself from reaching down to lift her out, but he knew she didn't want him to touch her, and he could hardly blame her for that.

And when she did, she kind of just fell over, groaning and crying as vicious cramping set into her legs and all over her already injured body. His resolve broke at that and Richard

tried to take her into his arms, but despite her impediments, she hurled herself away from him, shaking and shivering in a way she couldn't have when she was stuck down there, which only added to her looking as if she was having a seizure.

An EMT stepped forward with a blanket, but she was no more interested in allowing him to help her, either. Richard saw the man nod to someone who was behind Merice, who then sank down and gave her a very quick shot that rendered her unconscious in seconds.

He immediately picked up her frighteningly limp body and carried her out of the garage to a waiting stretcher, where he surrendered her to the care of the EMTs, who went to work on her. By the time they got her bundled into the back of the ambulance, she had a BP cuff on her, a pulse ox monitor, had been given IV fluids as well as glucose.

"Do you want to ride along?" one of the EMTs asked him.

He had to force himself to say it, but he did. "No. Where are you taking her? I'll follow you there."

She was still out during her time in the ER and was still unconscious even after they brought her up to her private room. He never left her side.

Billy kept him updated on what was happening. During the time that they'd been trying to get her out of the crawl space, other troopers and sheriffs had found where the men who were responsible for her kidnapping—including their leader, whom they'd been trying to get to for the past almost year. The majority of them had been killed in the resulting shootout, including the Don. The only ones who had survived were his lower ranking henchmen, who would be spending the rest of their lives in jail.

He'd personally see to that.

It was nice to know about all of that—to know that they didn't have to continue to fear for their lives, that they could go back to his house without that hanging over them.

But how could he possibly ask her to do that?

The good news was that there were no signs of rape or sexual assault, and he was very thankful for that. But he'd promised to keep her safe, and yet here she was, lying on a hospital bed looking like death warmed over, with a hairline fracture of her cheekbone, several bruised or cracked ribs, a dislocated shoulder, a broken ankle, and more bruises than a dropped apple in the fall.

There was no way that he could ask her to forgive him for this.

There was no way he was ever going to be able to forgive himself for it, either.

Chapter 8

Still, until he heard it from her own mouth, he wasn't about to leave her. He wanted her to see a friendly face when she woke up, even if she hated him on sight. They were giving her IV fluids as well as nutrition therapy and pain meds, the latter of which—along with the stress and exhaustion of the situation in general—were probably the reason why she was still out.

The doc had told him—because he was the closest thing to family she had—that she would likely sleep for quite a while, but he was fine with that. He'd lived in the hospital before with Anita at various stages of her illness, and he had no qualms about doing that for Merice, either.

It was early the next evening when she began to stir. He was watching TV, but not really, his eyes always darting to her to check on her, so he noticed immediately when she began to move and rose to stand by her side.

Normally, he would have joined her on the bed or at the very least taken her hand, but the sight of her throwing herself away from him in the garage would be burned into his brain until the end of his days, and it had made him wary

of scaring her by even the most casual of contact, so he didn't.

"Hey, baby," he said softly as he smiled down at her, his hands clutching the railing of the bed instead of her. "How're you feeling?"

Suddenly, she sat bolt upright and glommed onto him with a strength he'd never felt from her before, even one armed and wounded as she was. "Richard, Richard, Richard, Richard," she chanted, prayer-like. "You're here. You're really here!"

His eyes filled with tears that he refused to shed at the sound of her unexpected, pure joy in seeing him. "I am, honey."

Now he felt all right in sitting on the edge of the bed holding her, cautioning her not to do anything that might compromise her IVs. He didn't have much choice about it, not that he minded in the least—she was clinging to him like a limpet.

"Richard, Richard..." Her voice, which had been strong and at a normal volume before, almost sounding like her old self, faded so much that he almost couldn't hear what she was saying, so he leaned his ear closer to her mouth. "There... there w-were... There were..." He could feel her beginning to shake and shudder and tremble fit to lose all her teeth.

And suddenly, he knew what she was trying to say before she was able to get it out, thinking about where, exactly, that she'd been held captive, an old garage in a field in the middle of nowhere, in summer.

He thought of it at the same moment she said it, with all the dread and fear and loathing he knew she felt. "Bugs. Oh, God, there were bugs." Her voice broke completely and she dissolved into tears. "There were bugs all over me." She was writhing and wiggling as best she could, like she didn't have the ability to do in the crawl space. "I couldn't see them, Richard. I couldn't see them. But I could feel them. And I

couldn't move to get them off me. I tried. I tried so hard. They were crawling on me. They were crawling on me. Oh, they were crawling on me!" Her volume rose with each repetition of the phrase, until at last, she was screaming it while crying inconsolably.

That brought nurses running, but by the time they had arrived, she had collapsed in his arms.

He explained what she had said to them and what he knew about why that had made her so violently afraid.

They gave her a sedative, which would likely make her sleepy for a while.

When she awoke the next time, he had been sitting next to her, his hand on her arm now that he knew she could tolerate that, so he could detect the slightest movement she made.

That time, probably because of the medication she had been given, all she did was sob. He didn't try to stop her, but he did climb into bed with her and hold her, whispering stupid nothings to her, to try to reassure her with his voice and the presence of his big body as best he could, but he thought it was probably a good thing for her to get as much of it out as she could.

The next day, she was awake longer, although she refused to eat, even though they had discontinued the nutritional IV the day before. Or rather, she tried to refuse to eat.

One look from him and she finished most of it, looking to him for approval at how much she'd eaten. "Can I stop now, please?"

"Have the last of your muffin, baby, and then you can be done," he said, squeezing the hand he was holding and feeling her squeeze back. He'd offered to feed her, but Miss Independence had returned in some situations, and that was one. "Is there anything I can get for you or do for you? Anything you want from home? Jake's going to stop by."

"Oh my God, what about Teddy?"

"No worries," he said, patting her arm soothingly. "He's fat, dumb, and happy—and horribly spoiled eating tuna and shrimp and salmon—at Jake and Jenny's. He's going to have to go on a diet when we get him back."

He was acting as if he expected her to come back home to his place, but he kind of doubted that she would. Why would she trust him with her safety again, considering what had happened to her? But he didn't want to introduce yet another change to her life. He'd already decided that when she inevitably told him that she wanted to move out—to go back to her own house or whatever—he wasn't going to object, no matter how much it was going to hurt him. And he was spending a lot of his time dreading hearing that from her as he raked himself over the coals for not having protected her better.

She was in the hospital for a couple more days, and he was eternally grateful for the respite. It allowed him to continue the illusion that everything was okay between them. Richard had never been one for avoidance until now, when he knew he was likely going to lose her as soon as she was allowed to go home.

Finally, the morning came when she was told she was going to be discharged. Her complexion was slowly changing from deep, dark purple to mottled green and yellow. She wore a rib binder, one arm was in a sling, and she had a boot on her foot. He'd helped her do a bed bath, and he'd had to stop himself from punching another wall when he saw the extent of the cuts, scrapes, and hematomas on the other parts of her body. The bald, horrifying truth was that she had more bruises than undamaged skin. Still, she cheered up when she got the news and hugged him as tight as she was able to.

"Do you mind bringing the car around to the entrance?"

He forced himself to ask, "Do you want me to do that?"

"Of course, I do, silly. How else are we going to get home?"

He headed towards the door, unable to believe his good fortune, then stopped and came back.

"And you are still here because?" she asked pertly.

Richard produced a ticket. "Because valet."

"Ah. I should have guessed that such a fine establishment as this would have such a service."

"Yeah, no. This isn't Dartmouth-Hitchcock. It isn't even UVMC."

"Yes, but they've taken very good care of me, Richard. You have to admit that."

Some of that was because he'd learned long ago to ride herd on doctors, nurses, and CNAs, making sure that she got her meds when they were due, and raising holy hell when something they said they were going to do for her wasn't done. He knew from experience that patients needed to advocate for themselves, and he was one hell of an advocate. But she didn't need to know that.

Once all of the paperwork was done, the final orders given and gone over—she was expected to get in touch with a mental health professional to deal with the inevitable post-trauma stress—she was free to go. The surprising amount of crap she'd accumulated while staying there was crammed into one of those stupid plastic bags that was nowhere near big enough to handle all of it, and the wheelchair was in the room. She pivoted nicely into it and reached out to take his hand while the nurse chauffeured her down, even waiting with them for the valet to bring his car around. An orderly was nice enough to follow them down with the enormous bouquets of "get well" flowers and plants that folks had been nice enough to send her, from her work, and his, as well as just plain friends on both sides.

When she was safely seat belted in, they both thanked the

nurse and orderly profusely, and he drove her home as gently as possible.

They'd given her some pain meds, but not very many. If she needed it, he knew how to get other things that would ease her pain. But he'd wait until he saw how she handled it before he went that route.

Unable to stop himself, in good conscience, he asked, "You're sure you want to go back to the house?"

She looked stricken. "Yes, of course. Where else would I go?" Then she asked with a severe reluctance that she didn't bother to hide, "D-do you... not want me to go back to the house with you?"

"I just wanted to make sure that it was still where you wanted to be."

Her diffidence was painful for him to watch, especially since she reverted to not looking at him again, as she had done so often when they were very new but had stopped doing pretty much altogether as they had grown closer, he had noticed. She was looking out the window instead. "I do if you still want me there?"

"Of course, I do! It's where you belong, with me."

She seemed to accept that, for which he was truly grateful. And it was the truth. If she had decided that she wanted to live elsewhere, it would have killed him, but part of him would have, nonetheless, thought that she was only right in doing so. It would be an act of self-preservation that he would have absolutely understood.

Since they didn't have a wheelchair at the house—he'd long since donated the one that Anita had used—he simply carried her into their room.

"Do I have to be in here?" she asked. "I've been in bed for four days now."

He didn't relent, however. "Yes, at least for a little while longer. You have to admit that you're tired a lot. You haven't

quite recovered your usual feistiness, and this is the best place for you to be in that case."

She pouted, and he kissed her pout.

"I'm just going to go get the rest of the crap out of the car." His eyes narrowed on her. "You stay put, young lady."

"Yes, Sir," she replied meekly, which, of course, made him suspicious.

Although when he got back, she hadn't moved a muscle. In fact, she was fast asleep, sitting up, emitting those baby snores he found so adorable.

He didn't move her at all, not wanting to wake her, but he did put the covers where they would be easily reachable, as well as her phone, which was charging, and the remote. Richard ducked out and headed to the kitchen, placing an order with Noodle Emporium, who delivered, as well as Uber Eats, for a half gallon of ice cream—an order that cost him almost as much as his first, admittedly, junker car had. But she was more than worth it. He let her sleep as long as she wanted to, helping her to the bathroom when she awoke needing it in the middle of the afternoon.

When he deposited her gently back in bed, she promised that she was going to remain awake, and he stayed in there with her, bringing up the third season of *Stranger Things*, which they had been slowly working their way through. Five minutes into the first episode, she was asleep again.

Since he'd gotten all of the stupid little things he needed to get done—except for one that he wanted to talk to her about before doing it—he went and got his laptop and joined her there, glad to be next to her, where he could be at her beck and call if she needed him.

When she awoke later, and again, availed herself of his assistance getting back and forth from the bathroom—vowing that as of tomorrow, she would manage to get there herself—

he brought her back to the bed and heard her take a gasping breath.

"Teddy? Why isn't he here?"

Richard continued to get her tucked back into bed. "Well, because we didn't know if you were, indeed, getting out today. Jake and Jenny volunteered to bring him over to us, but since they were both at work this morning, there was no time to arrange it with them." He took his place on his side of the bed. "Besides, I wanted to talk to you about that. With all of your injuries, do you think it's a good thing for you to have a cat around to trip over, or who will land on your sore ankle or stomp on your sore ribs?"

Her answer was absolutely unhesitating. "Yes." He looked as if he was about to forbid it when she wheedled blatantly, "He is integral to my recovery. You can't always be home with me, but he can. He's affectionate and gives me someone to think about besides myself and... and what happened to me."

Richard frowned. That was hard to dispute, he had to admit. "Well, I'm going to be home with you for as long as you want me to be, but all right," he allowed. "It'll have to wait until tomorrow. Like I said, he's being spoiled rotten over there. They love him."

"Yes, but he belongs here, with me, with us."

"Tomorrow," he promised. "Are you hungry?"

"I'm starving!"

The Chinese food and ice cream were big hits, even though she didn't eat quite as much of either as he wanted her to. They spent the evening watching TV, with her curled—carefully—up against him. If he didn't look too hard, it might have been a normal night at home for them, minus the sling, boot, rib binder, as well as the meds that now lived on her nightstand and the fact that she couldn't suppress the groans of pain every time she moved.

He did everything he could to try to keep her comfortable

for the next ten days, and those groans—thankfully—had mostly dissipated. Teddy was back with them, and except for the occasional—and understandable—bout of tears, during which he held her as carefully as he could and did his best to try to console her, Merice seemed to be getting back to her old self reasonably well.

She insisted that he go back to work after he'd only spent five days at home with her, though, and although he was sorely tempted to put his foot down about that, she was fully capable of taking care of herself. It wasn't easy or comfortable to do it, but he knew that as much as she appreciated his tender, loving care, she preferred it that way.

He'd grilled her before he'd gone back, of course, wanting to make sure that she truly was okay with it. But, of course, she was.

"I'll be fine," she reassured him for the umpteenth time from where she was sitting in his big recliner like a queen. "You've brought me my meds, I have my frozen bottle of water that'll be nice and cold all day, and I have my phone, its charging cord, and the TV remote right at my fingertips, as well as my iPad in the pocket of the chair. You fed Teddy and did the litter box and he has his own water, so he's good. I'm just going to sit here like a lump all day and watch TV and probably nap."

"Napping is better than TV," he cautioned, leaning down to kiss her.

"Have I ever told you how spiffy you look in your uniform, Sheriff Hayes?" she asked, tilting her face up for more kisses.

"Wow, spiffy!" he teased. "Honest and for true?"

"I know. I don't say that to just anyone, you know," she informed him, raising her good hand up so that she could cup the back of his head as they kissed.

"You call me if you have any problems, you hear, young

lady?" he cautioned sternly. "Or even if you're just lonely. I'll come arunnin' back home in a heartbeat. Okay?"

"Yes, Sir."

"That's what I want to hear. But make sure you do it, or you won't be sitting comfortably for a week."

They both knew that she really wasn't sitting comfortably anyway—and for much longer than that—but neither said that.

That next Sunday, she informed him that she was going back to work.

If she'd been hale and hearty, she knew that having put it that way, she would have ended up over his lap. But as it was, she knew she could get away with it, probably for a few more weeks, until she could safely jettison all of her medical apparatus. He really couldn't punish her, nor did he seem to have any interest in doing so, or, frankly, in doing much of anything else to her, which left Merice feeling bereft, even though he was right next to her almost all the time.

He'd given her a look and had questioned her closely about how she felt, but she was pretty much back to normal, and he couldn't come up with a reason, beyond the fact that he liked having her at home, however sexist that was, why she couldn't.

It had been almost two months since the attack, and they were home together on a weekend they didn't have anything planned, no parties to go to or friends to visit, trips to take or holidays to celebrate.

And Merice intended to confront him about the fact that aside from comforting her when she needed it, he hadn't touched her. He hadn't spanked her, nor had he made love to her. He was still affectionate with her—he always reached out and took her hand when they were in the car, they walked arm in arm almost everywhere, and they snuggled in bed and he

spooned her to sleep, once she was comfortable with him doing so, every night.

But that wasn't what she was missing, what she was craving from him. And she was determined to get to the bottom of whatever the problem was. Had her kidnapping somehow caused him not to want her anymore?

That idea sent a chill through her and made her chest ache painfully. Richard meant more to her than any other man she'd ever been involved with, and she couldn't bear the thought of losing him. But neither did she want to stay in a sexless relationship.

So, after dinner, when they were enjoying the last of that bottle of Hennessy that she had bought him, and she was curled up against his side, she just went for it, right in the middle of an episode of *Staged*.

"So, do you not want me anymore, or what?" she asked, after swallowing a hefty gulp of the liquor and putting her glass down to pin him with her gaze.

He practically choked on his own mouthful, giving her a puzzled look, and putting his glass down, too.

"No, of course, I want you."

"Demonstrably, no. Do you not want to be my Dom, either?"

"I absolutely want to be your Dom."

He sounded sincere, but she could tell that he was holding something back, which was usually her thing, not his.

"Spill it."

"What?"

"Richard. Things are not right between us. You used to not be able to keep your hands off me. You used to spank me practically every day. But you haven't touched me since it happened. I could more easily understand if I was the one who was having intimacy problems, but what's gotten into you?"

He sighed and took another drink, staring at the glass in his hands.

The longer he was silent, the more dread began to spread from the stomach that was already in knots to the rest of her body. She'd hoped that once she'd brought it up, he would take her into his arms and make love to her—or even spank her. She didn't really care. All she wanted was for them to return to some semblance of what normal had been for them before she'd gotten herself kidnapped.

But that didn't happen, which only made her think that she was right, and he didn't want her any longer but was too nice to tell her so.

Then he said something she didn't expect. "How can you possibly want me to make love to you, or be your Dom, when I completely failed in one of my primary duties towards you?"

She didn't want to put words into his mouth, so she said, "Please explain."

"I'm your Dom and your lover. You live in my house. I'm a friggin' cop, and still, I couldn't keep you safe. I failed to protect you—failed miserably, resulting in you having a harrowing experience where you got seriously injured, and it's all my fault."

Merice was thunderstruck. She had no idea he felt that way. "Absolutely. You're in control of the whole world, you know, and you should have been able to stop some drug lord or mafia don from coming after you because you're perfect, after all, and omnipotent, at that."

"Cut the sarcasm, Merice. How could you possibly still want me in your life after what happened? How could you possibly not blame me for it, especially when I blame myself?"

"Well, if that's true, then I think you need to see someone and talk about it at least as much as I do." She put her hand on his arm tentatively, at least as unsure about whether he wanted her to touch him as he was about her wanting him to

touch her. "I don't blame you in the least. You're fighting the good fight, and collateral damage happens."

He sighed impatiently at that. "You are not just collateral damage," he ground out. "I should have been able to protect you. I should have come home that night and taken you somewhere safe myself."

"And left your work, and potentially left your own officers in harm's way by doing so."

"You are way more important to me than anyone else on the planet," he said to his drink.

Merice grabbed her courage in both hands and turned his face to hers. "I feel the same way about you, Richard. I've never said this to any other man, and I know it's way too early to be saying it, but the truth is that I-I love you."

His eyes went round, and she watched them fill with tears that he rapidly blinked back. "You can't. I don't deserve love from you. I deserve your anger and recriminations for all of the fear and the pain I caused you!" He hit his own chest—hard—to emphasize those last three words. "I can't bear the thought that I'm the reason that happened to you—your worst fear realized—"

"When Anita got lung cancer, did you hate yourself for it?" she asked dispassionately.

"What? No," he grumbled. "Of course not."

"But you told me that you smoked when you two first met, and you still smoke cigars, so I'll bet you smoked them around her, too."

He had. He'd quit smoking decades ago, but he'd stopped the cigars, too, when she'd been diagnosed. He'd never thought about that.

Merice shrugged her shoulders. "It was not a fun time, you're right. It was dark and dank and I hurt so badly and I was hungry and thirsty and I could feel the insects crawling on

me—" She shuddered hard, then stopped herself right there. This wasn't about her, it was about him.

Her voice shook and finally broke as she spoke in a voice that was barely above a whisper. "But one of the worst things about that experience, was that I didn't think I was going to live to be able to tell you that—that I loved you." She was looking down at her glass now, too. "I don't love easily, as you might have guessed. I keep my emotions close to the vest. But you've been so wonderful to me, so understanding and helpful, and you don't seem to mind all of my bizarre quirks and foibles and you're the absolute perfect Dom for me. How could I not love you?"

Merice cleared her throat and turned to him. "So, unless you're prepared to tell me that you want me to leave, to move out of here—"

"Don't you dare!" he growled, lifting her onto his lap with the utmost care, as if she was very easily broken, even though he knew, from how she'd come through this, she was stronger than she knew she was. He pressed his forehead and nose to hers. "If you can see your way to forgiving me, then I'll do my best to forgive myself." Then he moved a bit away to look into her eyes as he cupped her cheeks. "Because I love you. I adore you, even your quirks and foibles and idiosyncrasies and just plain craziness. I love you, Merice Boynton, and I never want you to leave my side."

He pulled her into a tight hug, where she whispered into his ear, "I love you, too, Richard Hayes. And I never want to leave your side."

Carolyn Faulkner

The words “spanking” and “discipline” have always sent a shiver up Carolyn Faulkner’s spine. She knows she’s not alone. Writing started as a way to explore her feelings. Soon short stories flowed from her pen featuring reluctant heroes taking the leading lady in hand, but always for her own good.

Today Carolyn is the author of dozens of books. She writes from her home in Maine, where she lives with her husband and leading man.

You can read an interview with Carolyn here:
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